THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

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- Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 64, No. 1. Whole No. 368, July 1974
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  - Right on, Chick!
  - The Raffles Special
  - Designated Murderer
  - Guest in the House
  - The Adventure of Black, Peter
  - The Jury Box
  - Death at Devil's Hole
  - Reflected Glory
  - Theory of the Crime
  - The World's Softest Touch
  - The Scrabble Clue
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A Chip of the Black Stone
by Isaac Asimov [1]

A new Black Widowers story by Isaac Asimov

Another vivid account of a monthly meeting of the Black Widowers Club... The honored guest this evening is a jeweler named Latimer Reed, and we are assured by the host, Geoffrey Avalon the patent attorney, that there will be no crime to solve, no mystery to unravel — but don't you believe it! We guarantee you will be fascinated by the romantic story that unfolds...

Geoffrey Avalon, the patent attorney, stirred his drink and smiled wolfishly. His hairy still-dark eyebrows slanted upward and his neat graying beard seemed to twitch. He looked like Satan in an amiable mood.

He said to the Black Widowers, assembled at their monthly club dinner, "Let me present my guest — Latimer Reed, jeweler. And let me say at once that he brings us no crime to solve, no mystery to unravel. Nothing has been stolen from him; he has witnessed no murder, has involved himself in no spy ring. He is here, purely and simply, to tell us about jewelry, to answer our questions, and to help us have a good sociable evening."

And, indeed, under Avalon's firm eye the atmosphere at dinner was quiet and relaxed and even writer Emmanuel Rubin, the ever-quarrelsome polymath of the club, managed to avoid raising his voice. Quite satisfied, Avalon said, over the brandy, "Gentlemen, the postprandial grilling is upon us, and with no problem over which to rack our brains. — Henry, you may relax."

Henry, who was clearing the table with the usual quiet efficiency that would have made him the nonpareil of waiters even if he had not proved himself, over and over again, to be peerlessly aware of the obvious, said, "Thank you, Mr. Avalon. I trust I will not be excluded from the proceedings, however."

Rubin fixed Henry with an owlish stare through his thick glasses and said loudly, "Henry, this blatantly false modesty does not become you. You know you're a member of our little band, with all the privileges appertaining thereto."

“If that is so,” said Roger Halsted, the soft-voiced mathematics teacher, sipping his brandy and openly inviting a quarrel, “why is he waiting on table?”

“Personal choice, sir,” said Henry quickly and Rubin’s opening mouth shut again.

Avalon said, “Let’s get on with it. Tom Trumbull isn’t with us, so, as host, I appoint you, Mario, as griller-in-chief.”

Mario Gonzalo, a not-incon-siderable artist, was placing the final touches on the caricature he was drawing of Reed, one that was intended to be added to the already long line that decorated the private room of the Fifth Avenue restaurant at which the dinners of the Black Widowers were held.

Gonzalo had, perhaps, overdrawn, the bald dome of Reed’s head and the solemn length of his bare upper lip, and made over-apparent the slight tendency to jowls. There was indeed something more than a trace of the bloodhound about the caricature, but Reed smiled when he saw the result and did not seem offended.

Gonzalo smoothed the perfect Windsor knot of his pink-and-white tie and let his blue jacket fall open with careful negligence as he leaned back and said, “How do you justify your existence, Mr. Reed?”

“Sir?” said Reed, in a slightly metallic voice.

Gonzalo said, without varying pitch or stress, “How do you justify your existence, Mr. Reed?”

Reed looked around the table at the five grave faces and smiled — a smile that did not, somehow, seriously diminish the essential sadness of his own expression.

“Jeff warned me,” he said, “that I would be questioned after the dinner, but he did not tell me I would be challenged to justify myself.”

“Always best,” said Avalon sententiously, “to catch a man by surprise.”

Reed said, “What can serve to justify any of us? But if I must say something, I would say that I help bring beauty into lives.”

“What kind of beauty?” asked Gonzalo. “Artistic beauty?” And he held up the caricature.

Reed laughed. “Less controversial forms of beauty, I should hope.” He pulled a handkerchief out of his inner jacket pocket and, carefully unfolding it on the table, exposed about a dozen gleaming, deeply colored bits of mineral.

“All men agree on the beauty of gems,” he said. “That is independent of subjective taste.” He held up a small deep-red stone and the lights glanced off it.

James Drake, the organic chemist, cleared his throat and said with his usual mild hoarseness, “Do you always carry those things around with you?”

"No, of course not," said Reed. "Only when I wish to entertain or demonstrate."

"In a handkerchief?" said Drake.

Rubin burst in at once. "Sure, what's the difference? If he's held up, keeping if in a locked box won't do him any good. He'd just be out the price of a box as well."

"Have you ever been held up?" asked Gonzalo.

"No," said Reed. "My best defense is that I am known never to carry much of value with me. I strive to make that as widely known as possible, and to live up to it, too."

"That doesn't look it," said Drake.

"I am demonstrating beauty, not value," said Reed. "Would you care to pass these around among yourselves, gentlemen?"

There was no immediate move and then Drake said, "Henry, would you be in a position to lock the door?"

"Certainly, sir," said Henry, and did so.

Reed looked surprised. "Why lock the door?"

Drake cleared his throat again and stubbed out the remnant of his cigarette with a stained thumb and forefinger. "I'm afraid that with the kind of record we now have at our monthly dinners those things will be passed around and inevitably one of them will disappear."

"That's a tasteless remark, Jim," said Avalon, frowning.

Reed said, "Gentlemen, there is no need to worry. These stones may all disappear with little loss to me or gain to anyone else. I said I was demonstrating beauty, not value. This one I am holding is a ruby — quite so — but synthetic. There are a few other synthetics and here we have an irreparably cracked opal. Others are riddled with flaws. These will do no one any good and I'm sure Henry can unlock the door."

Halsted said, stuttering very slightly in controlled excitement, "No, I'm with Jim. Something is just fated to come up. I'll bet that Mr. Reed has included one very valuable item — quite by accident, perhaps — and *that* one will turn up missing. I just don't believe we can go through an evening without some puzzle facing us."

Reed said, "I know every one of these stones and if you like I'll look at each one again." He did so, then pushed them out into the center of the table. "Merely trinkets that serve to satisfy the innate craving of human beings for beauty."

Rubin grumbled, "Which, however, only the rich can afford."

"Quite wrong, Mr. Rubin. Quite wrong. These stones are not terribly expensive. And even jewelry that is costly is often on display for all eyes — and even the owner can do no more than look at what he owns, though more frequently than others. Primitive tribes might make ornaments as satisfying to themselves as jewelry is to us out of

shark's teeth, walrus tusks, seashells, or birchbark. Beauty is independent of material, or of fixed rules of esthetics, and in my way I am its servant."

Gonzalo said, "But you would rather sell the most expensive forms of beauty, wouldn't you?"

"Quite true," said Reed. "I am subject to economic law, but that bends my appreciation of beauty as little as I can manage."

Rubin shook his head. His sparse beard bristled and his voice, surprisingly full-bodied for one with so small a frame, rose in passion. "No, Mr. Reed, if you consider yourself a purveyor of beauty only, you are being hypocritical. It's rarity you're selling. A synthetic ruby is as beautiful as a natural one and indistinguishable chemically. But the natural ruby is rarer, more difficult to get, and therefore more expensive and more eagerly bought by those who can afford it. Beauty it may be, but it is beauty meant to serve personal vanity.

"A copy of the Mona Lisa, correct to every crack in the paint, is just a copy, worth no more than any daub, and if there were a thousand copies, the real one would still remain priceless because it alone would be the unique original and would reflect uniqueness on its possessor. But that, you see, has nothing to do with beauty."

Reed said, "It is easy to rail against humanity. Rareness does enhance value in the eyes of the vain, and I suppose something that is sufficiently rare and, at the same time, notable, would fetch a huge price even if there were no beauty about it—"

"A rare autograph," muttered Halsted.

"Yet," said Reed firmly, "beauty is always an enhancing factor, and I sell only beauty. Some of my wares are rare as well, but nothing I sell, or would care to sell, is rare without being beautiful."

Drake said, "What else do you sell besides beauty and rarity?"

"Utility, sir," said Reed at once. "Jewels are a way of storing wealth compactly and permanently in a way that is more independent of the fluctuations of the marketplace."

"But they can be stolen," said Gonzalo accusingly.

"Certainly," said Reed. "Their very values — beauty, compactness, permanence — make them more useful to a thief than anything else can be. The equivalent in gold would be much heavier; the equivalent in anything else far more bulky."

Avalon said, with a clear sense of reflected glory in his guest's profession, "Latimer deals in eternal value."

"Not always," said Rubin. "Some of the jeweler's wares are of only temporary value, for rarity may vanish. There was a time when gold goblets might be used on moderately important occasions, but for the real top-of-vanity the Venetian cut glass was trotted out — until glass-manufacturing processes were improved to the point where such

things were brought down to the five-and-ten level.

"In the 1880's the Washington Monument was capped with nothing less good than aluminum and, in a few years, the Hall process made aluminum cheap and the monument cap completely ordinary. Then, too, value can change with changing legend. As long as the alicorn — the horn of a unicorn — was thought to have aphrodisiac properties, the horns of narwhals and rhinoceroses were valuable. A handkerchief of a stiffish weave which could be cleaned by being thrown into the fire would be priceless for its magical refusal to bum — till the properties of asbestos became well known.

"Anything that becomes rare through accident — the first edition of a completely worthless book, rare because it *was* worthless — can become priceless to collectors. And synthetic jewelry of all sorts may yet make your wares valueless, Mr. Reed."

Reed said, "Perhaps individual items of beauty might lose some of their value, but jewelry is only the raw material of what I sell. There is still the beauty of combination, of setting, of the individual and creative work of the craftsman. As for those things which are valuable for rarity alone, I do not deal with them; I will not deal with them; I have no sympathy with them, no interest in them. I myself own some things that are both rare and beautiful — own them, I mean, with no intention of ever selling them — and nothing, I hope, that is ugly and is valued by me only because it is rare. Or almost nothing, anyway."

He seemed to notice for the first time that the gems he had earlier distributed were lying before him. "Ah, you're all through with them, gentlemen?" He scooped them toward himself with his left hand. "All here," he said. "Each one. No omissions. No substitutions. All accounted for." He looked at each one individually. "I have showed you these, gentlemen, because there is an interesting point to be made about each of them—" Halsted said, "Wait. What did you mean by saying 'almost nothing'?"

"Almost nothing?" said Reed, puzzled.

"You said you owned nothing ugly just because it was rare. Then you said 'almost nothing.' "

Reed's face cleared. "Ah, my luck piece, my charm, my talisman. I have it here somewhere." He rummaged in his pocket. "Here it is. You are welcome to look at it, gentlemen. It is ugly enough, but actually I would be more distressed at losing it than any of the gems I brought with me." He passed his luck piece to Drake, who sat on his left.

Drake turned it over in his hands. It was about an inch wide, ovoid in shape, black and finely pitted. He said, "It's metal. Looks like meteoric iron."

"That's exactly what it is as far as I know," said Reed.

The object passed from hand to hand and came back to him. "It's

my iron gem," said Reed. "I've turned down five hundred dollars for it."

"Who the devil would offer five hundred dollars for that?" asked Gonzalo, visibly astonished.

Avalon cleared his throat. "A collector of meteorites might, I suppose, if for any reason this one had special scientific value. The question really is, Latimer, why on earth you turned it down."

"Oh," and Reed looked thoughtful for a while. "I don't really know. To be nasty, perhaps. I didn't like the fellow."

"The guy who offered the money?" asked Gonzalo.

"Yes."

Drake reached out for the bit of black metal and when Reed gave it to him a second time, Drake studied it more closely, turning it over and over. "Does this have any scientific value as far as you know?"

"Only by virtue of its being meteoric," said Reed. "I've brought it to the Museum of Natural History and they were interested in having it for their collection if I were interested in donating it without charge. I wasn't. And I don't know the profession of the man who wanted to buy it. I don't recall the incident very well — it was ten years ago — but I'm certain he didn't impress me as a scientist of any type."

"You've never seen him since?" asked Drake.

"No, though at the time I was sure I would. In fact, for a while I had the most dramatic imaginings. But I never saw him again. It was after that, though, that I began to carry it about as a luck charm." He put it in his pocket again. "After all, there aren't many objects this unprepossessing that I would refuse five hundred for."

Rubin, frowning, said, "I scent a mystery here—"

Avalon exploded. "Good God, let's have no mystery! This is a social evening. Latimer, you *assured* me that there was no puzzle you were planning to bring up."

Reed looked honestly confused. "I'm not bringing up any puzzle. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing to the story. I was offered five hundred dollars; I refused; and there's an end to it."

Rubin's voice rose in indignation. "The mystery consists in the reason for the offer of the five hundred dollars for a valueless piece of iron. It is a legitimate outgrowth of the grilling and I demand the right to investigate the matter."

Reed said, "But what's the use of probing? I don't know why he offered five hundred dollars unless he believed the ridiculous story my great-grandfather told."

"There's the value of probing. We now know there is a ridiculous story attached to the object. Go on, then. What was the ridiculous story your great-grandfather told?"

"It's the story of how the meteorite — assuming that's what it is

— came into the possession of my family."

"You mean it's an heirloom?" asked Halsted.

"If something totally without value can be an heirloom, this is one. In any case, my great-grandfather sent it home from the Far East in 1856 with a letter explaining the circumstances. I've seen the letter myself. I can't quote it to you word for word, but I can give you the sense of it."

"Go ahead," said Rubin.

"Well, to begin with, the eighteen fifties was the age of the clipper ship — the Yankee Clipper, you know — and the American seamen roamed the world till the Civil War and the continuing development of the steamship put an end to sailing vessels. However, I'm not planning to spin a sea yam. I couldn't. I know nothing about ships and couldn't tell a bowsprit from a binnacle, if either still exists. However, I mention it all by way of explaining that my great-grandfather — who bore my name, or rather, I bear his — managed to see the world. To that extent his story is conceivable. Between that, and the fact that his name was Latimer Reed too, I had a tendency, when young, to want to believe him.

"In those days, you see, the Moslem world was still largely closed to the men of the Christian West. The Ottoman Empire still had large territories in the Balkans, and the dim memory of the days when it threatened all Europe still lent it an echo of far-off might. And the Arabian peninsula itself was a mystic mixture of desert sheiks and camels to the West.

"Of course, the old city of Mecca was closed to non-Moslems and one of the daring feats a European or American might perform would be to learn Arabic, dress like an Arab, develop a knowledge of Moslem culture and religion, somehow participate in the ritual of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and return to tell the story. My greatgrandfather claimed to have accomplished this."

Drake interrupted. "Claimed? Was he lying?"

"I don't know," said Reed. "I have no evidence beyond this letter he sent from Hong Kong. There was no apparent reason for him to lie since he had nothing to gain. Of course, he may merely have wanted to amuse my great-grandmother and shine in her eyes. He had been away from home for three years and had only been married three years prior to his sailing, and family legend has it that it was a great love match."

Gonzalo began, "But after he returned—"

"He never returned," said Reed. "About a month after he wrote the letter he died under unknown circumstances and was buried somewhere overseas. The family didn't learn of that till considerably later, of course. My grandfather was only about four at the time of his

father's death and was brought up by my great-grandmother. My grandfather had five sons and three daughters and I'm the second son of his fourth son, and there's my family history in brief."

"Died under unknown circumstances," said Halsted. "There are all sorts of possibilities there."

"As a matter of fact," said Reed, "family legend also has it that his impersonation of an Arab was detected, that he had been tracked to Hong Kong and beyond, and had been murdered. But there is no evidence whatever to support that. The only information we have about his death was from seamen who brought a letter from someone who announced the death."

"Does that letter still exist?" asked Avalon, interested despite himself.

"No. But where and how he died doesn't matter. The fact is, he never returned home. Of course," Reed went on, "the family has always tended to believe the story, because it is dramatic and glamorous, and the story has been distorted out of all recognition. I have an aunt who once told me he was tom to pieces by a howling mob of dervishes who saw through his imposture in a mosque. She said it was because he had blue eyes. All made up, of course, probably out of a novel."

Rubin said, "Did he have blue eyes?"

"I doubt it," said Reed. "We all have brown eyes in my family. But I don't really know."

Halsted said, "But what about your iron gem, your luck piece?"

"Oh, that came with the letter," said Reed. "It was a small package actually. And my luck piece was the whole point of the letter. He was sending it as a memento of his feat. Perhaps you know that the central ceremony involved in the pilgrimage to Mecca are the rites at the Kaaba, the most holy object in the Moslem world."

Rubin said, "It's actually a relic of the pre-Moslem world. Mohammed was a shrewd and practical politician, though, and he took it over. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em."

"I dare say," said Reed coolly. "The Kaaba is a large irregular cube — the word 'cube' comes from 'Kaaba,' in fact — and in its southeast corner about five feet from the ground is what is called 'the black stone,' which is broken and held together by metal bands. Most people seem to think the black stone is a meteorite."

"Probably," said Rubin. "A stone from heaven, sent by the gods. Naturally it would be worshiped. The same can be said of the original statue of Artemis at Ephesis — the so-called Diana of the Ephesians—"

Avalon said, "Since Tom Trumbull is absent, I suppose it's my job to shut you up, Manny. Let our guest speak." Reed said, "Anyway, that's about it. My iron gem arrived in the package with the letter, and

my great-grandfather said in his letter that it was a piece of the black stone which he had managed to chip off."

"Good Lord," muttered Avalon, "if he did that I wouldn't blame the Arabs for killing him."

Drake said, "If it's a piece of the black stone, I guess it would be worth quite a bit to a collector."

"Priceless to a pious Moslem, I should imagine," said Halsted.

"Yes, yes," said Reed impatiently, *"if* it is a piece of the black stone. But how are you going to demonstrate such a thing? Can we take it back to Mecca and see if it will fit into some chipped place, or make a very sophisticated chemical comparison of my luck piece and the rest of the black stone?"

"Neither of which, I'm sure," said Avalon, "the government of Saudi Arabia would allow."

"Nor am I interested in asking," said Reed. "Of course, it's an article of faith in my family that the object *is* a chip of the black stone, and the story was occasionally told to visitors and the package was produced complete with letter and chip. It always made a sensation.

"Then sometime before World War One there was some sort of scare. My father was a boy then and he told me the story when I was young, but when I considered it after growing up, I realized that it lacked substance."

"What was the story?" asked Gonzalo.

"A matter of turbaned strangers slinking about the house, mysterious shadows by day and strange sounds by night," said Reed. "It was the sort of thing people would imagine after reading sensational fiction."

Rubin, who, as a writer, would ordinarily have resented the last adjective, was too hot on the spoor on this occasion to do so. He said, "The implication is that they were Arabs who were after the chip of the black stone. Did anything happen?"

Avalon broke in. "If you tell us about mysterious deaths, Latimer, I'll know you're making up the whole thing."

Reed said, "I'm speaking nothing but the truth. There were no mysterious deaths. Everyone in my family since great-grandfather has died of old age, disease, or unimpeachable accident. No breath of foul play has ever risen. And in connection with the tale of the turbaned stranger, nothing at all happened. Nothing! Which is one reason I dismiss the whole story."

Gonzalo said, "Did anyone ever attempt to steal the chip?"

"Never. The original package with the chip and the letter stayed in an unlocked drawer for half a century. No one paid any particular attention to it and it remained perfectly safe. I still have the chip, as you saw," and he slapped his pocket.

"Actually," he went on, "the thing would have been forgotten altogether but for me. About 1950 I felt a stirring of interest. I don't have a clear memory why. The nation of Israel had just been established and the Middle East was much in the news. Perhaps that was the reason. In any case, I got to thinking of the old family story and I dredged the thing out of its drawer."

Reed took out his iron gem absently and held it in the palm of his hand. "It did look meteoritic to me but, of course, in my great-grandfather's time meteorites weren't as well known to the general public as they are now. So, as I said earlier, I took it to the Museum of Natural History. They said it *was* meteoritic and would I care to donate it. I said it was a family heirloom and I couldn't do that, but — and this was the key point for me — I asked them if there were any signs that it had been chipped off a larger meteorite.

"The curator looked at it carefully, first by eye, then with a magnifying glass, and finally said he could see no sign of it. He said it must have been found in exactly the condition I had it. He said meteoritic iron is particularly hard and tough because it has nickel in it. It's more like alloy-steel than iron and it couldn't be chipped off, he said, without clear signs.

"Well, that settled it, didn't it? I went back and got the letter and read it through. I even studied the original package. There was some blurred Chinese scrawl on it and my grandmother's name and address in a faded angular English. There was nothing to be made of it. I couldn't make out the postmark but there was no reason to suppose it wasn't from Hong Kong. Anyway, I decided the whole thing was an amiable fraud. Great-grandfather Latimer had picked up the meteorite somewhere, had probably been spending time in the Arab world, and just couldn't resist spinning a yarn."

Halsted said, "And then a month later he was dead under mysterious circumstances."

"Just dead," said Reed. "No reason to think the death was mysterious. In the eighteen-fifties life was relatively brief. Any of a number of infectious diseases could kill. Anyway, that's the end of the story. No glamor. No mystery."

Gonzalo objected vociferously at once. "That's not the end of the story. What's the bit about the offer of five hundred dollars?"

"Oh, that!" said Reed. "That happened in 1962 or 1963. It was at a dinner party and there were some hot arguments on the Middle East and I was taking up a pro-Arab stance as a kind of devil's advocate — it was before the Six-Day War, of course — and that put me in mind of the meteorite. It was still in the drawer and I brought it out.

"I remember we were all sitting around the table and I passed the package and they all looked at it. Some tried to read the letter, but

that wasn't so easy because the handwriting is rather old-fashioned and crabbed. Some asked me what the Chinese writing was on the package and of course I didn't know. Just to be dramatic, I told them about the mysterious turbaned strangers in my father's time and stressed great-grand dad's mysterious death, and didn't mention my reasons for being certain it was all a hoax. It was just entertainment.

"Only one person seemed to take it seriously. He was a stranger, a friend of a friend. We had invited a friend, you see, and when he said he had an engagement, we said, well, bring your friend along. That sort of thing, you know. I don't remember his name any more. All I do remember about him personally is that he had thinning red hair and didn't contribute much to the conversation.

"When everybody was getting ready to go, he came to me hesitantly and asked if he could see the chip once more. There was no reason not to show it to him again. He took the meteorite out of the package — it was the only thing that seemed to interest him — and walked to the light with it. He studied it for a long time. I remember growing a little impatient, and then he said, 'See here, I collect odd objects. I wonder if you'd let me have this thing. I'd pay you, of course. What would you say it was worth?'

"I laughed and said I didn't think I'd sell it and he stammered out an offer of five dollars. I found that rather offensive. I mean, if I were going to sell a family heirloom it surely wouldn't be for five dollars. I gave him a decidedly brusque negative and held out my hand for the object. I took such a dislike to him that I remember thinking he might steal it.

"He handed it back reluctantly enough and I remember looking at the object again to see what might make it attractive to him, but it still seemed what it was, an ugly lump of iron. You see, even though I knew its point of interest lay in its possible history and not in its appearance, I was simply unable to attach value to anything but beauty.

"When I looked up he was reading the letter again. I held out my hand and he gave me that, too. He said, 'Ten dollars?' and I just said, 'No.' "

Reed took a sip of the coffee that Henry had just served him. He said, "Everyone else had left. This man's friend was waiting for him — the man who was *my* friend originally, Jansen. He and his wife were killed in an auto accident the next year, driving the very car at whose door he stood then, waiting for the man he had brought to my house. What a frightening thing the future is if you stop to think of it. Luckily, we rarely do.

"Anyway, the man who wanted the object stopped at the door and said to me hurriedly, 'Listen, I'd really like that little piece of

metal. It's no good to you and I'll give you five hundred dollars for it. How's that? Five hundred dollars. Don't be hoggish about this.'

"I can make allowances for his apparent anxiety, but he was damned offensive. He did say 'hoggish' — I remember the exact word. After that I wouldn't have let him have it for a million. Very coldly I told him it wasn't for sale at any price, and I put the meteorite which was still in my hand into my pocket with ostentatious finality.

"His face darkened and he growled that I would regret that and there would be those who wouldn't be so kind as to offer money. Then off he went — and the meteorite has stayed in my pocket ever since. It is my ugly luck piece that I have refused five hundred dollars for." He chuckled in a muted way and said, "And that's the whole story."

Drake said, "And you never found out why he offered you five hundred dollars for it?"

"Unless he believed it was a chip of the black stone, I can't see any reason why he should," said Reed.

"He never renewed his offer?"

"Never. It was over ten years ago and I have never heard from him at all. And now that Jansen and his wife are dead, I don't even know where he is or how he could be located even if I decided I wanted to sell."

Gonzalo said, "What did he mean by his threat about others who wouldn't be so kind as to offer money?"

"I don't know," said Reed. "I suppose he meant mysterious turbaned strangers of the kind I had talked about. I think he was just trying to frighten me into selling."

Avalon said, "Since a mystery has developed despite everything, I suppose we ought to consider the possibilities here. The obvious motive for his offer is, as you say, that he believed the object to be a genuine piece of the black stone, of the Kaaba."

"If so," said Reed, "he was the only one there who did. I don't think anyone else took the story seriously for a moment. Besides, even if it were a chip of the black stone, and the guy were a collector, what good would it be to him without proof? He could take any piece of scrap iron and label it 'chip of the Kaaba,' and it would do him no less good than my piece of iron."

Avalon said, "Do you suppose he might have been an Arab who knew that a chip the size of your object had been stolen from the iron stone a century before and wanted it out of piety?"

"He didn't seem Arab to me," said Reed. "And if he were, why was the offer not renewed? Or why wasn't there an attempt at taking it from me by violence?"

Drake said, "You say he studied the object carefully. Do you suppose he saw something that convinced him of its value —

whatever that value might be?"

Reed said, "How can I dispute that? Except that whatever he might have seen, I certainly never have seen. Have you seen anything?"

"No," admitted Drake.

Rubin said, "This doesn't sound like a mystery we can possibly solve. We just don't have enough information. — What do you say, Henry?"

Henry, who had been listening with his usual quiet attention, said, "I was wondering about a few points."

"Well then, go on, Henry," said Avalon. "Why don't you continue grilling the guest?"

Henry said, "Mr. Reed, when you showed the object to your guests on that occasion in 1962 or 1963, you say you passed the package around. You mean the original package in which the letter and the meteorite had come, with its contents as they had always been?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. It was a family treasure."

"But since 1963, sir, you have carried the meteorite in your pocket?"

"Yes, always," said Reed.

"Does that mean, sir, that you no longer have the letter?"

"Of course it doesn't mean that," said Reed indignantly. "We certainly do have the letter. I'll admit that after that fellow's threat I was a little concerned, so I put it in a safer place. It's a glamorous document from the family standpoint, hoax or not."

"Where do you keep it now?" asked Henry.

"In a small wall safe I use for documents and jewels."

"Have you seen it recently?"

Reed smiled broadly. "I use the wall safe frequently, and I see it every time. Take my word for it, Henry, the letter is safe — as safe as the luck piece in my pocket."

Henry said, "Then you don't keep the letter in the original package any more."

"No," said Reed. "The package was more useful as a container for the meteorite. Now that I carry that object in my pocket, there was no point in keeping the letter in the package."

Henry nodded. "And what did you do with the package, sir?"

Reed looked puzzled. "Why, nothing."

"You didn't throw it out?"

"No, of course not."

"Do you know where it is?"

Reed frowned and paused. He said at last, "No, I don't think so."

"When did you last see it?"

The pause was longer this time. “I don’t know that, either.”

Henry seemed lost in thought.

Avalon said, “Well, Henry, what do you have in mind?”

Henry said, “I’m just wondering” — he quietly circled the table removing the brandy glasses — “whether that man wanted the meteorite at all.”

“He certainly offered me money for it,” said Reed.

“Yes,” said Henry, “but first such small sums as would offer you no temptation to sell it, and which he could well afford to pay if you called his bluff. Then a larger sum couched in such deliberately offensive language as to make it certain you would refuse. And after that a mysterious threat which never materialized.”

“But why should he do all that,” said Reed, “unless he wanted my iron gem?”

Henry said, “To achieve, perhaps, precisely what he did, in fact, achieve — to convince you he wanted the meteorite and to keep your attention firmly fixed on that. He gave you back the meteorite when you held out your hand for it; he gave you back the letter — but did he give you back the original package?”

Reed said, “I don’t remember him taking it.”

Henry said, “It was ten years ago. He kept your attention fixed on the meteorite. You even spent some time examining it yourself and during that time you didn’t look at him, I’m sure. Can you say you’ve seen the package since that time, sir?”

Reed shook his head slowly. “I can’t say I have. You mean he fastened my attention so tightly on the meteorite that he could walk off with the package and I wouldn’t notice?”

“I’m afraid you didn’t notice. You put the meteorite in your pocket, the letter in your safe, and apparently never gave another thought to the package itself. This man, whose name you don’t know and whom you can no longer identify thanks to your friends’ death, has had the package for ten years with no interference. And by now you could not possibly identify what it was he took.”

“I certainly could,” said Reed stoutly, “if I could see it. It has my great-grandmother’s name and address on it.”

“He might not have saved the package itself,” said Henry.

“I’ve got it,” cried out Gonzalo suddenly. “It was that Chinese writing. He could make it out and he took it to get it deciphered with certainty. The message was important.”

Henry’s smile was the barest flicker. “That is a romantic notion that had not occurred to me, Mr. Gonzalo, but I don’t know that it is very probable. I was thinking of something else. — Mr. Reed, you had a package from Hong Kong in 1856 and at that time Hong Kong was already a British possession.”

“Taken over in 1848,” said Rubin briefly.

“And I think the British had already instituted the modern system of distributing mail.”

“Rowland Hill,” said Rubin at once, “in 1840.”

“Well, then,” said Henry, “could there have been a stamp on the original package?”

Reed looked startled. “Now that you mention it, there was something that looked like a black stamp, I seem to recall. A woman’s profile?”

“The young Victoria,” said Rubin.

Henry said, “And might it possibly have been a rare stamp?”

Gonzalo threw up his arms. “Bingo!”

Reed sat with his mouth open. Then he said, “Of course, you must be right — I wonder how much I lost.”

“Nothing but money, sir,” murmured Henry. “The earliest British stamps were not beautiful.”

Criminalimerick

The Black Widowers: 4
by D. R. Bensen [2]

The hour's getting later and later;
There's a tale of hatred (and hater);
The Black Widowers thrill
To its uncanny chill,
And who clears it all up? — the waiter!

Things Change
by Joyce Harrington [3]

A new crime story by Joyce Harrington

Old Mrs. Trimble was found sprawled in the town cemetery with her head bashed in. Her son Wayne was the town's chief (and only) pharmacist, and no one, including Officer Hupp, seemed to notice the inconspicuous absence of something in the drugstore's window display...

It had been so easy. So easy he wondered why he hadn't done it years before. Wayne Trimble chuckled to himself as he rounded the comer of Elm and Main on his first day back to work after the funeral.

Everyone in town knew of Mrs. Trimble's habit of walking her nasty yippish little dog through the cemetery at dusk. Everyone, including Officer Hupp, had warned her that it was not the safest thing in the world to do. Not in these days when there were dope addicts and wild kids everywhere, even in a place like Minchville — Main Street with five cross streets named after trees and a surrounding sprawl of immobilized mobile homes. But nothing would deter Mrs. Trimble from her nightly ramble with Precious Lotus trailing at her heels.

Old Ansel, the cemetery caretaker, had grumbled at her through the years for allowing the pop-eyed waddling Peke to lift his leg against the chiefest monuments of Minchville's dear departed. On those occasions the solemn cemetery silence would be rent with shrill altercation.

"Now, Miz Trimble," Ansel would rumble in his age-and tobacco-thickened voice, "it just ain't respectful for you to let that mutt scamper over them graves and do what he likes just anywheres. Even on the Judge." And he would threaten to lock the gates and put up a *No Dogs Allowed* sign.

Mrs. Trimble's nasal voice would rise and split the air, float among the tombstones and down the hill, until the whole town could hear her declaiming, "I had little respect for the Judge in life, so why should I waste it on him now, Ansel Coombs? Tell me that. And while you're at it, tell me on whose authority you will lock those gates and keep me out. My plot is bought and paid for, and so is one for

Precious Lotus, and if we wish to spend twenty-four hours a day visiting our final resting place, no amount of signs or locks will keep us out."

There had been some objection in the town to Mildred Trimble's desire to spend eternity with Precious Lotus by her side. Some folks even thought it was against the law to bury animals in a human cemetery. But Mrs. Trimble raised her voice and, aided by her status as the Judge's widow, prevailed. Some folks wouldn't speak to her or have her to tea after that, but they mostly considered it a small loss since speaking to Mrs. Trimble consisted mainly of listening to her whine and rail against the town council, the postal service, the price of eggs, and her son, Wayne.

Wayne Trimble, happily full of sweet pastry and several cups of coffee, forbidden during his mother's long reign in favor of economical breakfasts of nourishing but tasteless mush, listened to the tip-tapping of his small feet on the sidewalks of Main Street this fine October morning and his head buzzed with a little rhyme to keep time with his steps.

Tippity-tap,
Out of the trap.
Bippity-bop,
Bang on her top.

To outward appearances Wayne Trimble was the very model of the bereaved son. This past week had been a trying one for him. From the moment that Mildred Trimble had been discovered sprawled in the cemetery with her head bashed in and Precious Lotus snuffling and shaking at her side until the final ceremonies yesterday afternoon, Wayne had conducted himself with a solemn decorum that satisfied the town at large and Officer Hupp in particular. Everyone knew how devoted Wayne had been to his mother. He had to be to put up with her constant nagging and complaining delivered in tones of shrewish self-pity for forty-odd years. Everyone also knew that for years Wayne had been "visiting" with Verna Hicks who lived in the trailer park on the south side of town and worked as a finisher in the town's one industry, the shoe factory out on Route 2.

Mrs. Trimble had loudly refused to countenance Verna as a daughter-in-law. She was low class, a factory girl. Wayne, in a feeble gesture of independence, had continued to see Verna, spending many of his evenings in her trailer watching television and playing cards and eating butter-pecan ice cream. Verna considered herself engaged to Wayne, and didn't seem to mind either the interminable length of the engagement or her second-class status in Mrs. Trimble's eyes.

“Peace, ho-ho!” sang the little voice inside Wayne Trimble’s head as he returned subdued “Good mornings” to the few townsfolk he met on his way down early-morning Main Street. “Quiet, ha-ha!” Arriving at Vogelsang’s Drug Store he paused to admire the window display: two large apothecary jars filled with colored liquid surrounded by a wealth of trusses and bedpans, heating pads and crutches, and occupying the foreground an artistic pyramid of patent cold remedies.

It was a dizzying display of all that was dear to the heart of Wayne Trimble. Only last week, in fact, the day before the tragic demise of Mrs. Trimble, Wayne had removed the summertime pyramid of insect repellent and sunburn lotion and replaced it with the more seasonal pile now reposing colorfully in the foreground. The background never changed. Wayne had dusted the jars and prosthetic appliances lovingly, but they were the same jars and appliances that had reminded Minchville’s populace of their infirmities for over 20 years. Between the two large jars, one red, one amber, there squatted a solid bronze mortar, symbol of the pill-pounder’s ancient craft.

Wayne smiled as he unlocked the door and prepared to resume his position as Minchville’s chief (and only) pharmacist, splinter remover, and sympathizer to the town’s lumbagoes and sciaticas, rheumatisms and unspecified aches and pains. But before exchanging his sober gray suit coat, the black band still fastened around its sleeve, for his starched white pharmacist’s jacket, he removed a long, heavy, knobbed object from his pocket.

Alone in the shop, for his assistant had covered for him during his week of tribulation and loss and now would have the day off, and the soda fountain did not open until mid-morning, Wayne weighed the object in his hand and examined it carefully under the fluorescent light. It looked just fine. Next, he peered out of the shop door, and satisfied that no person abroad on Main Street would approach the drug store within the next few moments, he nipped over to the back of the window, opened the wooden hatch giving access to the display, and swiftly replaced the long, heavy, knobbed object in its accustomed place.

“For what is a mortar without a pestle,” he chirruped to himself, “what is a train without a trestle, what is a Wayne without his mother?” Ending on a high note, Wayne Trimble allowed himself a euphoria of chuckles and a modified tap dance on the resounding marble floor of the drug store before buttoning himself into his professional manner. He then set himself to the chore of taking stock of his pharmaceutical supplies to see what might have run short during his week-long absence.

Wayne Trimble had a busy day. It seemed as though everyone in

Minchville and its environs had developed an alarming series of minor ailments. Sore throats came in for lozenges and to extend sympathy. Migraine sufferers had run out of aspirin and asked how he was doing. Even Officer Hupp came in for a package of com plasters, bringing with him a plate of brownies baked by Mrs. Hupp for "that poor Trimble boy," and the news that a farmer several miles out on the River Road had found and turned in a waterlogged ladies' billfold containing Mrs. Trimble's driver's license and identification cards. There was no money in the billfold. Everyone in town knew of Mrs. Trimble's habit of carrying several bills of large denomination. She had delighted in buying a newspaper or a ten-cent postage stamp with a $20 bill.

No, Wayne had no idea how much money had been in the billfold on the fateful night. And yes, he'd be happy to stop by the station on his lunch hour to identify it for sure. In the meantime don't those brownies look yummy, and wouldn't Officer Hupp like to have one along with a cup of coffee at the soda fountain? Wayne poured the coffee himself into thick tan mugs, and side by side at the counter they munched brownies and discussed "the case."

Officer Hupp considered that the finding of the billfold out on the River Road bore out his theory of a gang of young thugs, probably on motorcycles, who had swept through Minchville pausing only long enough to bean Mrs. Trimble, steal her billfold, then race away down the River Road. They were probably in the next state by now.

To Officer Hupp's credit it should be noted that before embracing his motorcycle-gang theory, he had looked into the whereabouts of both Wayne Trimble and Ansel Coombs that night. He considered it far more likely that old Ansel should rise up in wrath against the continued desecration of his graveyard and strike down old lady Trimble with a spade than that the wormish Wayne should turn on his mother after a lifetime of submission to her ear-splitting demands.

However, Ansel Coombs had been safely tucked into a back booth at The Happy Hour Roadhouse absorbing beer with his cronies, and it was the occasion of his homecoming that gave the alarm and caused the battered body of Mrs. Trimble to be found. As he returned to his vine-covered cottage just outside the cemetery gate at about 10:30, supported by his chums, Jackson Spiker and Luke Leep, the three were startled by a high mournful keening emanating from the confines of the graveyard.

With a cry of "Ghosts!" Spiker and Leap had dropped the sodden Ansel on the path and lit out down the hill as fast as their arthritic legs could carry them. Ansel Coombs, more cantankerous than ever with a snootful, had growled, "Ghosts, my great Aunt Fanny!" and armed with flashlight and pickax had set out to investigate the goings-

on in. his cemetery. He followed the piteous howl, and after much stumbling and a few false turns among the stone angels, came upon the pop-eyed dog guarding his mistress' mortal remains.

As he later told Officer Hupp and whoever else would listen to him, Ansel Coombs was only sorry that he wasn't there to hear what Mildred Trimble said to her murderer before he lowered the boom on her. It must have been a doozie and worth using as her epitaph.

As for Wayne Trimble, why, Wayne had spent the entire evening with Verna Hicks in her trailer. He'd gone there directly from work, had supper (meat loaf and mashed potatoes) and the two of them had got involved in a lengthy game of Monopoly that lasted all evening. They were still negotiating for possession of Park Place when Officer Hupp arrived with the news of Mrs. Trimble's misadventure. Verna Hicks, questioned separately, had corroborated Wayne's statement and added some further details which reddened Officer Hupp's ears and were omitted from his report.

Officer Hupp polished off two brownies and left, promising to let Wayne know if there were further developments. Wayne, clearing off the coffee cups, reflected that it had been sheer genius that had inspired him to lift his mother's billfold, remove the money, and toss the billfold into the rainbarrel behind the house. When it had become necessary for him to drive to the lawyer's office at the county seat 20 miles away for the reading of the will, he had simply fished the billfold out of the rainbarrel and somewhere along the River Road, he couldn't remember exactly where, he'd flung it from the car window in the general direction of the river. He was sure no one had seen him. He was sure it would make no difference now that it was found.

The long afternoon passed quickly enough enlivened by neuralgias and charley horses and further donations of edibles which the donors felt entitled them to all the gory details. Wayne told his simple story over and over again, and yearned for closing time and the peace and quiet now to be his forever in the little white frame house on Elm Street. Verna had kindly offered to take charge of Precious Lotus until a home could be found for him. There was nothing now to interfere with his quiet enjoyment of the things he found good in life.

Wayne could now build his model ships on the dining-room table and no one would nag at him to clean up the mess. He could read his favorite magazines with his feet on the couch and no one would tear out the centerfolds or disturb his repose. He might even take up pipe smoking or even, Wayne chuckled, keep a bottle of whiskey in the house. There was no end to the things he could do now. And there would be no fretful whine to say him nay. It had all been so easy.

Just before closing time, after Wayne had amassed enough dainty food to supply a wedding party and felt that if he had to tell the story

one more time he might well astound everyone and confess the deed himself, in came Miss Emily Orr for her weekly bottle of Lydia Pinkham's. Miss Emily tottered down the length of the store, hollering as she came.

"Wayne Trimble, Wayne Trimble! What you gonna do now, Wayne-Boy?"

"Why, Miss Emily, what brings you out this afternoon?" It was always best to humor Miss Emily who was 80 if she was a day, and never minded what she said.

"Curiosity, son. Same as every other busybody in town." She bore down on him, safe behind a counter stacked high with notions.

"But I need my Lydia P., too," she confided in an undertone.

Wayne reached to the shelf behind him for the bottle. He nearly dropped it as Miss Emily cackled and bellowed her next question. Heads at the soda fountain turned to listen.

"You gonna get married now, Wayne-Boy?"

"Why, no, Miss Emily. Whatever gave you that idea? At least, not right away. It wouldn't be respectful." Wayne busied himself slipping Miss Emily's tonic into a crinkly white paper sack and writing the amount of her purchase on her account card.

"Be a fool if you don't. Nothin' to stop you now, is there?" Miss Emily snatched up her Lydia Pinkham's in a withered brown claw and headed for the door, yelling as she went. "It's past time you made an honest woman of that Hicks girl. Everybody knows. Don't you think they don't, Wayne Trimble. Stop by for tea and jam cakes some time, y'hear."

The door slammed behind her and its little bell tinkled into a thick silence. The remaining soda-fountain customers smirked at each other, paid their bills, and left. Andy, the fountain clerk, cleared the counter and removed his apron and jacket.

"Don't pay her no mind, Mr. Trimble," he said as he prepared to leave for the day. "She's just an old hen. Cackle, cackle, cackle all the time."

"Oh, I won't, Andy. Thanks. It's been quite a day." Wayne started turning out the lights in the front of the store.

"See you tomorrow, Mr. Trimble." And Andy was gone.

Alone in the store, Wayne Trimble thoughtfully gathered together all the covered dishes, cookies, and pies that had showered upon him during the day. He managed to get them into one large bag, all the while thinking of Miss Emily's question, "You gonna get married now, Wayne-Boy?" For truth to tell, it had never entered his mind. His arrangement with Verna was of such long standing, it had achieved a kind of permanence in his mind.

True, at one time he had ached to make Verna his bride, and she

had been willing if not exactly eager, but that was years ago and his mother's loud objections and lurid recounting of Verna's faults of birth and breeding had forced their relationship into a pattern of pretense, Verna pretending that marriage was imminent, Wayne pretending that the situation didn't exist, and Mrs. Trimble pretending that she didn't know anything about anything.

No, Wayne had not considered marriage at all. He'd scarcely had time to enjoy the fruits of his mighty blow for freedom. For the first time in his life he meant to live alone, peacefully, quietly, without his mother's voice constantly and irritatingly telling him what was good for him, what to eat, what to think, what to do, and even when to go to bed. No, he was not quite ready to give up his newly won state of single blessedness.

But come to think of it, Verna was pretty much attached to her independence, too. Maybe she wouldn't be so eager to marry now, to move out of her cozy trailer and into the white frame house so filled with memories of Wayne's mother. He had been unnerved by Miss Emily's suggestion that the whole town was breathlessly waiting to march him from funeral wreath to wedding bells. But maybe he really had nothing to worry about. Verna would undoubtedly be willing to carry on as before. Everything would continue to be peaceful and quiet and easy.

Much relieved, Wayne Trimble locked up the drug store for the night and with his heavy bag of goodies tip-tapped his way up Main Street bidding a pleasant "Good evening" to such townsfolk as he passed along his way. Up Main Street to Elm, turn right, two blocks along Elm, through the wrought-iron gate, up the path to the front door. Wayne Trimble luxuriated in using his own front door. For forty years Mrs. Trimble had insisted that Wayne use only the back door so as not to track dirt into her sacred front parlor. Now Wayne used only the front door and he didn't even bother to wipe his feet.

Looking forward to a quiet supper of Nellie Starling's chicken fricassee sending forth a mouth-watering aroma from the bottom of the bag in his arms and the company of a new mystery thriller from the library, Wayne Trimble opened his front door. The door had been unlocked. That was funny. Wayne couldn't remember whether or not he'd locked it that morning. People in Minchville didn't bother to lock their doors very much. It wasn't neighborly. Oh, well, it didn't matter. Wayne Trimble opened his front door and stepped into his parlor.

"Is that you, Way-yun?" The voice came shrieking at him from the back of the house. Startled, he dropped the bag of food and stood riveted to the spot. "How come you're using the front door, Way-yun?" Sharp, purposeful footsteps approached, and a scrabbling of tiny paws and an awful high-pitched yipping accompanied them.

Had he dreamed the whole thing? Were all the events of the past week nothing but a brainstorm, the results of an overheated imagination? No, of course not. There on the floor lay proof that Mildred Trimble and her nagging voice were well and truly laid to rest. All that lovely chicken mingled pinkly with a shattered rhubarb pie, and molasses cookies crumbling wetly into pools of chicken gravy. Oh, my. Wayne gazed sadly at the destruction of his quiet supper. But that voice. That irritating nasal voice. So like, so very like. Who?

"Oh, Way-yun! Look at that mess. Will you just look at that mess. All over the nice clean floor. Well, you'll just have to clean it up. No, no, Precious Lotus, you keep away from that. You'll get a nasty old chicken bone in your little throatie, and you wouldn't like that."

Wayne raised suddenly tear-filled eyes.

"Hello, Verna," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, you old silly," she screeched. "Why on earth shouldn't I come over and cook for you? After all, we are engaged. Now you clean that up while I get dinner on the table. I don't know what gets into a man when he lives alone, but I had to clear a whole heap of scrap wood off the dining room table before I could set a plate."

She bustled off to the kitchen, followed by Precious Lotus, who leered back over his shoulder at Wayne.

"Verna," Wayne called after her. "What did you do with that scrap wood?"

"Threw it away, of course."

Wayne ate silently, swallowing his food mechanically without tasting it. Verna, sitting in his mother's chair, seemed not to notice his brooding silence, for she chattered shrilly throughout the meal. It was not until dessert that he could bring himself to speak.

"Verna," he began.

"Now stop fiddling with your rice pudding," she interrupted. "Eat it. It's good for you."

"Verna," he tried again.

"Way-yun, I think we have something important to discuss." Wayne shuddered as she simpered at him across the table. How was it, he thought, that he'd never noticed the likeness. Her voice, the things she said. She'd never been like that in the trailer. Or had she, and he'd never noticed?

"Way-yun dear. Do you think it's too soon to set the date? I don't think we need to wait too long, do you? After all, we have been engaged for eight years. Nobody would think it was disrespectful if we got married right away. Everybody knows you need someone to look after you."

“Now, wait a minute, Verna.” Wayne had no intention of letting himself be stampeded into another 40 years with a nagging, whining voice controlling his destiny. “I can take care of myself, and—”

“Oh, by the way, Way-yun. There’s something else I forgot to mention. Or rather, I forgot to mention it to Officer Hupp. Remember that night, that awful night when your mother was— Well, when Officer Hupp came to the trailer that night, I was so upset I plumb forgot to tell him about your forgetting to bring the butter pecan.”

“Verna, what are you talking about?” Wayne’s eyes narrowed, but his heart sank.

“Oh, you remember, Way-yun. You forgot to bring the ice cream, and after supper you went back to the drug store to get some from the freezer chest while I washed the dishes. I thought you were a pretty long time getting it, and it was all melty and mushy when we ate it. And I forgot all about it in all the hullabaloo and only just remembered it today.”

“I see,” said Wayne Trimble.

“Do you think I should remember it to Officer Hupp?”

“No, Verna. I don’t think you should do that.”

“Well, then, how about next Saturday afternoon?”

“Saturday afternoon?”

“For the wedding, Way-yun.”

“Why, yes, Verna. Next Saturday afternoon will be just fine.”

Verna bustled around the table and planted a wifely peck on Wayne’s cheek.

“Now that that’s all settled,” she announced, “I think I’ll take Precious Lotus for a little walk. You can do the dishes while I’m gone, Way-yun.”

A cloud of gloom settled over Wayne Trimble as he wielded the dishrag in a pan of greasy water. He tried to turn his thoughts into pleasanter channels, to think of the drug store, the center of his life, of his jars of many-colored pills and capsules, his bottles of syrups and elixirs, but all of these happy visions ended with the inevitable one of coming home to Verna every day.

He thought of all the catalogues and brochures sent out by the drug companies advertising new cures for old complaints. Wayne dearly loved poring over these catalogues when business was slack. All the new pills, new potions to add to his teeming shelves. So many new things. New.

It occurred to Wayne that his window display was hardly in keeping with the newness of developments in the drug business. Maybe he should completely redecorate the window — get rid of those old jars, they were only full of colored water anyway, make a clean sweep of all the trusses and bedpans, and fill the window with

new things. Newfangled humidifiers, elaborate equipment for the care and feeding of babies, maybe even a pry amid of expensive cosmetics to beautify the craggy-faced farm wives who were his customers.

And the old mortar and pestle — well, that was an antique and probably valuable. He would bring that home. Yes, indeed, that would be a real nice thing to have around the house, particularly the pestle.

Plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose.
The more things change, the more they are the same.

Right on, Chick!
by S. S. Rafferty [4]

A new Chick Kelly story by S. S. Rafferty

Chick Kelly, the medium-time night-club comic with a slanguage all his own, was finding show biz tough. Out-of-town bookings were as scarce as roosters' eggs, so Chick opened up a small Third Avenue club to keep doing his act.

Kelly's calling card might read:

Chick the Dick

Comedy Schticks and 'Tec Tricks

A refreshing change of reading pace — call 'em, Chick!

❖

When I quit the road and opened up a small Third Avenue night club, I thought I'd left all my troubles behind me. I overlooked two important details. One, that the national economy was going to opt for instant poverty; two, that my sister would now have my phone number. She sometimes uses it instead of 911, Manhattan's police emergency number.

Lila was born with a silver panic button in her hand, so I have learned to divide everything she dreams up by seven. That's not a bad rating on the Chick Kelly Reality Index. I know some guys — most of them producers and press agents — who are divisible by forty-eight before you get to the truth.

It's about 6:00 p.m. and I am at the joint having a business breakfast with Barry Kantrowitz, my former agent and present partner. Barry was as successful an agent as I was a comic, so we were made for each other. Barry is divisible by three.

Of course, having breakfast with Barry is no great culinary experience. How any guy can eat shredded wheat with milk is beyond me. It's like eating a wet mattress. I go for the Brisbane special — a

rare strip sirloin, eggs over easy, hash browns, and plenty of mayonnaise.

I'm halfway through the first egg when Ling, my headwaiter, comes over and tells me that Lila is on the phone to inform me that my niece and nephew have been kidnaped.

I might as well have been talking to a farmer in Outer Mongolia for all the sense I got out of her. The children had been missing for five hours, and since they were the only witnesses to the D.A.'s killing, it had to be a snatch. And if I ever loved her, I would start negotiations with the underworld for their safe return.

This is some breakfast conversation! I told her to put Arthur, her husband, on, but she said he was at police headquarters. I told her I would be over pronto, hung up, and started dividing by seven.

My nephew and niece are 14 and 9 respectively. Flip is a big kid. To spirit him away would require all seven of the Santini Brothers and a large van. His sister, McCawber, is a human eel, and it would take fancy footwork just to shake her hand.

At this point, folks, you're probably asking yourself what's with the names? I can take credit only for Flip. McCawber was her father's idea. Arthur McQuade (pronounce that AH-thur, as in AHdvertising agency) is more in love with his ancestors than the Dalai Lama. The girl is named after James Petny McCawber, who invented the inkwell or something. Flip's real name is Foster Chapin McQuade, and God help him. Arthur did not take it kindly when I suggested that a kid named Foster sounded like he was being raised by someone else for pay. How could I introduce him? Meet my Foster nephew? So I call him Flip. Mostly because he's all mouth ("like someone else I know," my mother would add).

Normally I would write the whole thing off as two kids being late for dinner, but the D.A. killing got to me. It's time to get on the think, which I do.

I tell Ling to get me a copy of the *Post*, which, when you think of it, is like asking Walter Cronkite to tune in NBC for the latest news report. Ling reads more newspapers than a presidential adviser.

"What do you want to know, boss?" he says with a hurt look on his face. I had really wounded the guy.

"What's with the D.A. being murdered?"

"Not the D.A. An assistant. He was the prosecutor in the Siepi case. They found his body behind a soda-pop machine in the East 14th Street IRT subway station this afternoon."

Ling goes on to give me the picture, spitting out data like a teletype. Miles Corbett was an ambitious Assistant District Attorney, and the Siepi case was his first big shot at the headlines. I was already familiar with the Siepi hassle. They had nailed old Gino with a Murder

One for knocking off Sally Bond. In my book it was a draw.

Gino Siepi was a hood and Sally was an ex-tramp who made her bread by blackmail. Good old Gino the Sappy was the last person seen leaving Sally's apartment on the night she got it. The boys in blue played tag and Gino lost.

So where does this leave me? *Did* the kids see Corbett get it? This Ling cannot answer, so it's back to Ma Bell for me.

Believe it or not, there are a few cops who like me. Not love me, mind you, but like me. One of them is Steve Kozak. Steve is a sergeant on the Vice Squad and we have mutual friends.

Steve tells me that he doesn't know too much about the case except that the cops didn't want to take Siepi to trial. The evidence was full of holes, but Corbett, being top man while the D.A. was out of town, insisted. For three days he's getting his pants beaten off in court, and it looks like Siepi will soon be walking the streets again. Then on Wednesday, Corbett makes a grandstand play for the TV cameras and announces he will bring in vital evidence the next day.

"We told him it was a dumb thing to do," Steve tells me, "but a guy who wants to be Governor someday has to create cliffhangers for the public. As for the snatch, I'm empty. Sorry about the kids. Give me ten minutes and I'll dig around."

Now I'm getting scared. It's the gut response when trouble decides to sit on your porch instead of someone else's.

The phone ringing was as startling as a clang out of hell. It was Kozak with a spadeful.

Corbett had left his apartment on East 86th Street yesterday morning at 8:45. According to his wife, he was carrying an envelope in his brief case which he had picked up at Kennedy Airport the night before around midnight.

At this point the police theory was that Sally Bond, being the bright girl she was, had salted away her blackmail dope with someone out of town. It was the old "If something happens to me, open this envelope and spill the beans." That someone got in touch with Corbett and flew in with the goods.

"So how do the kids figure in?" I asked him.

"Your niece and nephew were on the same subway as Corbett. The little girl recognized him on television when they announced his murder. She said he had been sitting across from her all the way from 77th Street, and just before the train pulled into the 14th Street station he bolted into the next car. She remembered that he had been carrying an unusual-looking brief ease — Corbett's was made of ostrich skin. Lieutenant Jaffee thinks that Corbett saw his killer and was trying to get away. He also thinks your niece may have seen the killer, too."

"*Jaffee!* Is Jaffee on the case?"

"Yeah, Chick, so I'd stay clean if I were you."

Early on I said a few cops like me. Jaffee hates me. He has never forgiven me for getting out of a murder rap when a lady was found dead in my apartment.

"Does he know the kids are relatives of mine?"

"I don't know, but what's the difference? He'll do a good job anyway."

That I had to give him. I have seen Jaffee in action and he's good. Believe me, I respect my enemies.

"The thing that gets me, Steve, is how you guys got a line on the kids."

"Their father called in Thursday night after the little girl recognized Corbett's picture on a TV newcast about his murder."

Good old AH-thur, the civic-minded goon. If he had kept his mouth shut, the kids would now be safe. I made a mental memo to break AH-thur's neck when all this was over.

"Didn't Jaffee put a guard on the kids? He drops them into this mess, makes them a target, then doesn't guard them?"

"That's what's odd about this, Chick. He had three men outside their apartment building, one in the rear and two in the lobby. All good eye men. They never saw the kids leave. Jaffee's had the building searched twice."

"Why didn't he put someone right outside the door?"

"Mrs. McQuade wouldn't allow it."

Oh, yes, the old Kelly family bugaboo — what will the neighbors think?

"So what's happening, Steve? Was it one of Siepi's morons?"

"That's the party line at the moment, but they've all gone beddy-bye. But you can't discount anyone who was in the Bond dame's little black book. We estimate that crowd to be about a hundred, so take your pick."

Sweet sufferin' Saint Sebastian! My palms are beginning to sweat. I have loved very few things in my life, even an ex-wife or two, but those two kids really ring the gong with me. Right now I want to get a machine gun and knock off every hood in town until I find them. But that's Nutsville.

"Tell me straight, Steve, do you think, they'll knock them off?" My throat is getting very tight, and I'm fighting back a crybaby bit.

"Straight, Chick, I really don't know. If it was Siepi's boys, I don't think so. Hoods don't usually kill kids. They'd probably just hold them until their hit man gets out of the country. But if it was someone else, one of the people being blackmailed, you can't tell. But take it easy. You sound shaky. Jaffee has every available man on the street. He's

set up a command post at the 19th Precinct, so you know where not to show up."

I hung up, went back to my table, and near got sick looking at the steak and eggs. Ling had gone out and bought the bulldog edition of the *News,* which had pictures of the kids. I have the same ones on my dresser. Ling is reading the recap, but I am hardly paying attention. Then a sentence hits me and I ask Ling for a repeat.

"Police are asking anyone who saw a person carrying an ostrich-skin brief case in the vicinity of the Union Square station of the IRT around 8:45 Friday morning to come forward."

Now that strikes me as funny. That's the hazard of being a comic. You see and hear the oddball things in life. The sight of a guy who has just murdered someone in a crowd walking around with his victim's brief case — in ostrich yet — is just inviting attention, Yet, if he took the blackmail dope out of the case, he would surely dump the case, wouldn't he? Anywhere, just to get rid of it. Now, in little old New York, an expensive brief case left sitting somewhere does not go homeless for long. In fact, out at Kennedy, it is the basis for an entire industry.

I don't know what Jaffee is thinking right now, but that brief case intrigues me. If he has a command post, I can have one too, so I go into action. First, I tell Ling to call Mario Puccini, who runs a small limousine service out of 76th Street. When he shows up, I give him a sack of money and tell him to start hitting the hack stands and hangouts like the Belmore at 23rd and Lex and Kaye's at 78th and Lex. There are more cabs in New York than patrol cars, so right away I'm ahead of Jaffee on surveillance. Since the kids' pictures are in the *News* and cabbies wouldn't be caught dead without a copy, they knew what faces to look for.

Now I have to find out where Siepi's boys have dived for the mattresses. Jaffee, I know, is pulling in every stoolie in town, but he's kidding himself. No stoolie is going to sing a medley that ends up with "Old Man River." Okay, I've got an angle. Ziggy Klein fronts the five-man combo that plays my joint on weekends. If you want to find out what's going on under the scalp of New York, get a bunch of musicians together and have them ask questions. They're into the scene. Ziggy and his boys get busy with their contacts.

I get these pots simmering and reach for another. Who was on Sally Bond's Hit Parade of Secret Sins? Ten years ago this would have been an easier task. But since the unions have decided there were too many newspapers in New York and buried all but two, there aren't too many gossip scribes around with that kind of info. So I turn to Tish Loman, whom I don't particularly like, but she digs me and I'm kind of a rat with women. Tish tosses parties for a living. Yes, folks, there

are people so anxious to get into society that they hire people to throw a party for them. Tish knows every celebrity in the city and all the dirt besides. However, I do not feel like being charming at the moment, so I send Barry Kantrowitz to her place as my emissary. I have other fish to fry.

On my way up to 86th Street I ask the driver if he's on my payroll and he says he is. He also gives me his theory of the whole affair. If there are 2000 hacks on the street, there have got to be 3000 different theories. It is an occupational disease with these guys.

I was surprised, but relieved, to find that Jaffee had not planted one of his boys outside the Corbetts' apartment door.

The guy who answered the buzzer was a tall good-looking kid who told me that his sister, Mrs. Corbett, could not be disturbed. The death of her husband had floored her and the doctor had her under sedation. He was about to give me the heave-ho when I told him who I was.

"Chick Kelly. The comedian! Well, how are you? I'm in the business myself in a way. I'm a drama student at Columbia."

He said his name was Ted Saunders and that he lived with his sister and brother-in-law when school wasn't in session, which it wasn't. Come to think of it, the McQuade kids were on vacation, too.

Saunders invites me in and I can tell he is trying to build a show-business contact. I should have told him that I had to open my own club to keep doing my act, but why spoil it? I needed information. Saunders is full of information because he has already done the audition for the police.

It seems his brother-in-law left the apartment around 11:30 p.m. on Wednesday to go to Kennedy Airport and didn't get back until about 3:00 a.m., then went straight to his den where he stayed until 5:00 or 5:30 a.m. He got some sleep and left for court around 8:45.

"Yes," Saunders said, "the brief case was unique. My sister had it made in Mexico last year. Miles was very proud of—"

He stopped short when a woman in a wrapper walked into the living room. She was probably a stunner under normal conditions, but right now she looked like hell.

"More police questions?" she asked with a weary kind of exasperation.

"No, Stella, Mr. Kelly isn't from the police. He's Chick Kelly — you know, the comedian. Mr. Kelly, my sister, Mrs. Corbett."

"Oh, Lord, what next? Police, Chinese orphans, and now a comedian! Are you a friend of Ted's, Mr. Kelly?"

I didn't get a chance to answer because Saunders had already shot a question.

"Chinese orphans? Stella, maybe you should cut back on that

sedative, honey. You sound a little delirious."

"Ted, stop treating me like a child. There were two Chinese orphans here when you were out this afternoon. Collecting for war orphans. I gave them a dollar just to get rid of them."

The conversation went on between brother and sister and I know it's time to do a dissolve. I fast-talk my way out of there with a story about knowing the late Mr. Corbett and dropping by to pay my respects.

It took three tries before I found a phone that worked, which is a remarkable feat in itself, the odds usually being five to one. I plunk in a dime and when Lila's voice comes on, I tell her to shut up and listen.

"Last Halloween the kids went to that school dance as Chinese, didn't they?" She gives me a yes and I tell her to check the closets. Lila is confused but obedient, and when she comes back with the news that the costumes are missing, I shout hallelujah and tell her that her children are no more kidnaped than I am and that when we turn them up I want first licks.

Back at the club, things are really humming. The cabbies haven't turned up anything, but Ziggy's boys are firing on all sixes. Siepi's boys have holed up in a private house on Staten Island. That's a trade card for my eventual confrontation with Jaffee. I also put out the word to the cabbies that we are no longer looking for the charming McQuade tots, but to keep the brights on for Lum Foo and his panhandling sister.

I was beginning to think that Barry Kantrowitz had eloped with Tish Loman, but he turns up finally, and has he got some nuggets. Now I'm ready for Jaffee and I'm enjoying myself immensely. Of course, my original concern was to find the kids, but now I had Jaffee to show up. Maybe it's my nature to be an SOB, maybe not. But Jaffee had worked me over once, and I wanted to get even. As Rodney Dangerfield, a fellow comic, says, "I don't get no respect," and I wanted some respect from that hard-nosed Lieutenant.

The 19th Precinct is on East 67th Street. You can always tell a cop from the 19th — they have a built-in bored look from standing guard outside foreign Embassies all day and night. They ought to float the UN over to Hoboken and save the city a lot of money. The move wouldn't hurt Hoboken any, either.

Lieutenant Jaffee is a rough piece of work. He's built like a tank and has a shiny dome. The men in the Division call him Bullethead. They tell me he got a law degree going to NYU nights, which gives me a great line about his studying in the dark.

I wasn't two feet into the squadroom when he spots me and lowers the boom.

"What the hell do you want, Kelly?" my old pal greets me with a

snarl. “Beat it.”

“Hello, Lieutenant, nice to see you again.” As you may have guessed, I can be very charming.

“Look, Jokeboy, I don’t need you around here. Scram.”

“Whoa, Lieutenant, just a sec. I have an interest in this case you’re on.”

“Your niece and nephew. I know. But I won’t hold that against the McQuades. I haven’t any news anyway, and if I did, I’d tell your sister, not you.”

“That’s proper. No argument from me. But I have some news, and I thought I’d give it to you rather than the newspapers. You see, Lieutenant, I have an affection for you. I want in every way to—”

“Cut the trimmings, will you, Kelly? If you have some information, dish it out. I’m not that vain.”

I’m thinking “a guy with a bullethead should be vain?” If Jaffee was a heckler in an audience, I could really take him apart. You know, like, “Well, I see the Fifth Artillery is in town,” or “Aren’t you glad the war is over so you can get parts for your head?” But I know Jaffee has a low boiling point beyond which he is not adverse to using his hands in the clenched position, so I stow the wisecracks and get down to business.

When I tell him about the kids wandering around dressed like Orientals, he first doesn’t believe me. Then he does believe me and almost cannonades himself through the ceiling. It’s beautiful. Then he tells a flunky to put the word out to the patrols and chews another one out for being a wall-eyed idiot. I assumed he was one of the great eye men at my sister’s apartment house.

After he gets that done, Jaffee gives me a piece of his mind about my probably being a bad influence on the kids and that if he were my brother-in-law he would make sure they never saw me. Bullethead as my brother-in-law! The one I’ve got is no peach, but Jaffee! My God, I’d commit sororicide, and even nephewcide and nieceacide.

“I know you feel very jubilant, Kelly, but don’t take any comfort from it. I almost wish Siepi’s guys did have them. At least they’d be safe.”

“What are you talking about, Jaffee? Safe?”

“Those kids are out there somewhere playing amateur detective, and you can bet someone is gunning for them. That’s not funny.”

You know, he was right. I hadn’t thought of that. If the entire police force couldn’t find them and a thousand cabbies couldn’t spot them, how could a lone killer do it? But still and all, it was a fact that wouldn’t go away.

Okay, enough of jaffing at Jaffee. I gave him the five names Tish had come up with and he grins.

"You can forget about Jeb Farrell the decorator and Phil Morgan the fight promoter. They're accounted for at the time of the murder. Why look so surprised, Kelly? We sift through dirt, too. As for McIlroy, we have a possible. He's been known to toss some weird parties and could be a blackmail victim, although he denies it. He says he was walking in Central Park at the time of the killing. Hah! The other two are new to me. We'll check it out, but this Phyllis Court doesn't fit into the picture. This was a man's job, I'm sure of it. The last one, Calvin West, who's he?"

"My source say he's a painter with a past. No one knows too much about him."

"Your source is Tish Loman, so stop being coy. You just can't leave the ladies alone, can you, Kelly?"

Someday I am going to devote a whole day trying to analyze why Jaffee dislikes me. I am getting a sneaking suspicion it has to do with women. With his looks Jaffee couldn't attract Tugboat Annie. When we have time I'll do a whole number for you on my approach to women. It's cool, man, cool.

Jaffee is busy sending out his underlings to check on the names and is ignoring me.

"What are you going to do about the kids, Lieutenant?"

"What the hell do you think I'm going to do? Only now it won't be so difficult. I think I know where they are."

"Yeah? Where do you think?"

"Two kids dressed up like Orientals, stand out in a crowd, and if this nephew of yours is half as smart as his mother thinks, then there's only one place they'd head for. Chinatown."

"But they don't know anyone in Chinatown."

"They don't have to know anyone. It's the Chinese New Year and there'll be dancing in the streets all night. Hanragan," he said to one of his plain-clothesmen, "get Mrs. McQuade on the phone and find out if either child has a Chinese classmate. They could be holing up there."

I started to leave when Jaffee barked at me, "Kelly, you stay the hell out of Chinatown, do you hear me? I've got experts in that district and they can comb it clean without your help. By the way, you may care to know they're celebrating the Year of the Rat."

So Jaffee wants to play zap. He's a creampuff.

"Oh, by the way, Lieutenant, I've been so busy digging up names for you to check and finding out about the kids that I didn't have time to rush out to 241 Elizabeth Street in Tottenville. That's in Staten Island, you know. You take the ferry over the waves. That's where you'll find Siepi's brood. Out in Tottenville at 241 Elizabeth Street they are celebrating the Year of the Dope."

I am out of there like a shot, flag a cab, and head back for the club. I've just got time to do the eleven o'clock show. I quiz the driver and he tells me he's been clued in on the Chinese switch. I start wondering how much this is all costing me. Then I start planning just how I am going to punish my nephew. There is that season pass to the Knicks that I could lift. No, that's capital punishment and that's been outlawed. But why plan? He won't be able to see after AH-thur gets hold of him.

It was a wild night. The eleven o'clock show went over good, but the two o'clock brought in a bunch of drunks, which is par. I stayed at the club all night so I could act on any calls from cabbies — I didn't completely cotton to the Chinatown theory. We got a nibble about seven o'clock in the morning, but it turned out to be two real Chinese kids in the Bronx. It was the first time I had seen the sun come up in seven years. It hadn't changed much.

Then, at 10:30, we got a hot tip. A driver spotted two Chinese kids in the 300 block on Jay Street in Brooklyn, then lost them. He thinks they might have ducked into one of the buildings, so he's standing watch. I tell him to keep the meter running, then I make a jump for Mario's waiting limo, and barrel out there.

We cruised up and down the 300 block, but no kids. Then it hit me. Why would they come all the way over to Brooklyn, I'm asking myself, when bango! There it is in front of me. The Transit Authority Building. The whole thing started on the subway, didn't it? What a dummy I am. Flip is a smart little son of a gun.

The guy behind the Lost and Found counter did a double take when I asked him.

"What's with the ostrich brief cases?" he says, giving a silent *oy veh* with the hands. I'm the third to ask that question this morning. First it was the guy with the mustache, and then it was the two kids, Chinese kids, and now me. More silent *oy vehs* and then he says the kids were there about twenty minutes ago. He can't tell me much about the first guy, just that he had a mustache and a scar on his cheek.

Back in the parked limo, I am trying to focus in on the faces on Tish's list, but no luck. No guy with a mustache and scar.

"Why would Flip come down here anyway?" Mario asks me. "If someone found it they would give it to the cops."

"The kid was on the right track, Mario. Because the other guy came down here, too. Now that guy's got two problems. He has two kids running around loose who might be able to identify him, and the blackmail papers are also floating around somewhere. I'm trying to visualize what Corbett must have done on that subway. He spots this dude and knows he's going to get it, so he tries to beat him into the

next car. Now he couldn't have stashed the brief case in the 14th Street station because the cops have pulled it apart and found zero."

"Hey, Chick, I ain't been on a subway in years," Mario says from the front seat, "but why didn't that D.A. get off at 18th Street if he spotted the guy at 23rd?"

"Mostly because there isn't an 18th Street station, Mario."

"Hell, there ain't. I used to date a bimbo on East 19th Street years ago and always got off at that station."

I didn't bother to mention it to Mario, but I think we knew the same bimbo because I remember getting off at 18th Street too, on the same mission. I'm out of the car and back into the Transit Authority lickety-split. I ask the guy at the Lost and Found what happened to the IRT 18th Street station, and do you know what I get? "Did someone lose it?" he asks. Everyone wants to be a comic.

"Look, you're breaking me up, pal. Just give me a straight answer."

"Yeah, they closed it down about ten, fifteen years ago. It was some kind of economy drive. I forgot it was there, to be honest with you."

"Maybe it was demolished. You know, sealed up or something?"

"Maybe the entrance, but not the station. Why bother?"

When I got back to the car and asked Mario for the gun, he gave me the Alice in Wonderland routine.

"Come on, Mario, you've hauled iron around in this heap for years. Give. Please?"

"But, Chick, you don't have no license."

"Neither do you, buddy. Is it sterile?"

He gives me a nod, hands me the gun, and I slip it into my pocket. I've got an idea in my head that's going to make Jaffee the joke of the Department. I tell Mario to get back to the club. I can get where I'm going faster by the rattler.

At the Jay Street station I grab the IND and get off at Sixth and Fourteenth. I probably could have figured a route to take me directly to the 14th Street station at Union Square, but I really didn't have five years to spend. Besides, the best way to go is the way you know. I came up on Sixth (okay, Avenue of the Americas) and headed east, stopping at one of the rag shops where I bought a genuine Japanese flashlight. With all the Jap goods flooding the country, I'm beginning to think they really did win World War II.

I flagged a cab and had him take me to 18th and Park and found just what I expected. No entrance. I then hoofed down to the 14th Street station, went through the turnstile, and pushed my way to the downtown local track.

There is one criticism leveled at New Yorkers that is unfair.

People, mostly tourists, think that local citizens are indifferent and cold. They're just minding their own bloody business, folks! Now if I were in Cleveland, and Cleveland had a subway, someone would wonder what a guy was doing entering a dark subway tunnel and report it. Not in New York, baby. If you want to go for a stroll up the tracks, you can go right ahead and nobody will make a peep.

I waited till a downtown local train had cleared the station, then slipped down the narrow stairs to the track and ran like hell toward 18th Street. Up ahead of me I could see the headlights of another train, probably as far up as 33rd Street. I have read that if you lie down in the center of the tracks, a train will roll over you without touching you, but I wasn't about to prove the theory. Old Fleetfoot Kelly made it in plenty of time in the half light of the tunnel.

The 18th Street station was something out of a Fellini movie. It was a complete station with its tiled walls, muted change booth, and stairs that led nowhere. It was something dead. A tomb.

I came up on the platform on all fours. The station had about four dirty 40-watt bulbs burning a dull illumination that created a bevy of shadows. A painter broad I used to know would call it chiarascuro, and the chiarascuro was scaring the devil out of me. I heard a scurrying in the comer and reeled with the gun ready to find a rat or something, when I found two rats in Chinese clothing.

"Uncle Chick, baby," that young punk says to me with his sister hanging on his arm. Man, I wanted to bust him one in the chops.

"Boy, you two are beautiful, really beautiful. What are you trying to do, give your mother a heart attack?"

"Chick, we solved it, man, don't you dig it?" he says, holding up the ostrich brief case. His father sends him to one of the best schools in the city, and he talks like a hipped sideman.

"Yeah, I dig, Foster."

"What's with the Foster bit, Chick?"

"Uncle Charles to you, buster. How are you doing, McCawber?"

The light of my life says she's okay, but I know she's scared. She comes to me and I give her a hug. That's the chimpanzee syndrome. And she's part monkey anyway. I had put the gun in my pocket and was holding her when I heard him.

"Bring the case over here, kid," the voice said from the dark end of the platform. "Don't move, Kelly."

Flip walked into the shadow, then came back without the brief case and stood next to me. I would jam the bloody gun in my jacket pocket where I couldn't get it out easily!

"Look, pal," I said to the voice, "I can't see who you are, so let's call it even. You scamper out of here and we'll forget the whole thing. You're as free as a big beaked bird. We'll wait here for ten minutes —

an hour if you like."

He didn't answer and I knew his silence was going to be killing *us.* I couldn't see him, but my ears are like sonar webs. He hadn't moved since he had last said his piece, so I had a blind fix on him. I have played soldier with the kids since they were old enough to hate pablum, so I hoped they'd remember the script.

I yelled as loud as I could, "Hit the deck!" and dove into the dark at the voice.

I was almost on him when I felt the bum in my arm. I had one hand on him and we both went down. There was no scuffle — he was motionless. Jaffee's shot had gone through Ted Saunders, Corbett's wife's brother, and plinked me in the arm...

Jaffee was, of course, full of threats; there was my carrying iron, trespassing on subway tracks, interfering with a police investigation, and contributing to the delinquency of minors. The last was AH-thur's two cents.

What really ticked Bullet-head off was the interview I gave to the media. I told them I knew it was Ted Saunders all along. He could easily have had a peek at the papers Corbett brought back from the airport, and he could have known the kids were in Oriental dress. My theory was that Teddy-boy had seen a lucrative future in the papers Corbett had gotten, and went after them. I also added that Columbia's Drama School should beef up its course on make-up. Ted's phony mustache and scar were from hunger. I had him on voice anyway; that's why I tried to fake him out with the escape bit.

One TV newsman went bananas over my heroics and called my leap at Saunders Kier-kegaardian. And we all know what a fine acrobat he was.

Anyway, I got the headlines and the club is jammed with tourists who want to meet the great comic-detective. No, that's not right — the great detective-comic.

Just before I went on for the eleven o'clock show, McCawber calls me to tell me they are grounded for six weekends. And I tell her that's cruel and inhuman punishment and that she should get herself a lawyer. Before I hang up, she wants to know if she and Flip really have to call me "Uncle Charles." She doesn't like "Uncle Charles."

I'm about to say okay, but I can never resist an opening. "Maybe, if you're really good for a while. But for the time being you can call me 'Uncle Rocco.' " That ought to drive AH-thur up the wall a few times.

Right on, Chick!

The Raffles Special
by Barry Perowne [5]

A new Raffles adventure by Barry Perowne

Perhaps the most distinctive quality of E. W. Hornung's original Raffles stories was the aura of decadent charm that emanated from the writing and the characterizations. Well, that is exactly the appeal Barry Perowne has infused into his new stories about A. J. Raffles, amateur cracksman-and-cricketer — into the writing, the characters, and the authentic turn-of-the-century background and color. And this newest Raffles exploit has an extra and special charm — as you will learn for yourself...

❖

"Shh!" said A. J. Raffles suddenly. "Listen, Bunny!"

Tense beside him in the concealment of a thicket of wait-a-bit thorn, I held my breath.

Far off on the veldt, desolate and illimitable in the moonlight, a jackal howled. Twenty paces from us, a water-tank elevated on iron supports cast a long shadow across the glinting tracks of a single-line railway.

I heard a faint humming from the rails.

"A train," I said

"At last!" said Raffles.

His grey eyes gleamed. His keen face was beard-stubbled. Any resemblance which either of us bore now to gentlemen, in this war which many people were predicting would be the last of the gentleman's wars, was purely coincidental.

Our uniforms as subalterns, the rank in which we had been called up from the Reserve for active service with a Yeomanry regiment, were in tatters. We had had the bad luck to get captured, but had escaped from the crowded P.O.W. camp, and for many days now we had been on the run.

The humming from the rails was growing louder.

"A goods train, probably," said Raffles.

I swallowed with a parched throat. We still were deep inside Boer territory.

"What if it's a troop train," I said, "crammed with Oom Paul's

sharpshooters?"

I had developed a considerable respect for grim old President Kruger and his fighting farmers.

"We'll soon know," said Raffles. "There's the smoke!" Distant puffs of it, flame-tinted, billowed up against the vast sky limpid with stars. The locomotive came into view, the respirations from its smokestack becoming less frequent as it approached.

"Slowing down," said Raffles. "Yes, they're going to take on water here, Bunny."

I could make out now the gleam of the locomotive's piston-rods. They were beginning to idle. It was a train of half-a-dozen goods trucks, tarpaulin-covered, with the guard's small van at the rear. The rails of the track vibrated, a jet of exhaust-steam hissed out between the wheels, and I felt the slight tremor of the earth under my feet as the locomotive came to a standstill abreast of the water-tower.

From the firelit interior of the cab a man jumped down, evidently the fireman, for his face, overalls, and railwayman's cap were black with coal-dust. He had in his hand a long rod of iron with a hook at the end. The driver, an older, bearded man in overalls and peaked cap, with a short clay pipe in his mouth, clambered down after the fireman.

"And here comes the guard," Raffles whispered.

The guard's shadow, with widebrimmed hat, bandolier, and slung rifle, flickered over the sides of the goods trucks as he approached from the rear of the train.

Raffles breathed, "Ignore the old driver, Bunny. Keep the fireman occupied while I get that guard's rifle. Right? Off we go!"

We darted out from the shadow of the bush, Raffles making for the guard, myself for the fireman, who was reaching up with the rod, his back to me, to unhook the cumbersome hose of the water-tank.

The driver, lighting his pipe, saw me and shouted a warning as I raced past him. The fireman turned quickly. I was almost upon him. He aimed an almighty sideswipe at me with the iron rod. I heard it whistle over my head as I butted him in the belly and we went down together, locked and wrestling, rolling over and over in the dust.

The man was all muscle and sinew, from stoking engines. I never had felt anything like it. I could not hold him. He got on top. His knee drove into my chest. His hands clamped on my throat. His eyes glared down at me from his mask of coal-dust. I clutched at his arms. They were like iron bars, but suddenly, blindingly, a solid deluge of water descended upon the pair of us. It was as though the heavens had opened. We rolled apart, gasping and spluttering, from the shock of it.

As I staggered to my feet, I saw that in our fight we had rolled right under the hose, from which the deluge was coming. Raffles had

started it. He had one hand on the small wheel of the water-cock. In the other he held the rifle, menacing the driver and guard with it. They had their hands up, and the fireman, drenched like myself, his face washed almost white, also put up his hands rather sullenly.

"Now then," said Raffles, as he turned off the downpour. "This train is from Pretoria, of course, and is bound for Beira, in neutral Portuguese territory. It just so happens that my friend and I are going that way ourselves, so we'll gladly take the train there for you. There's just one small point. When we steam across the frontier, we shall need to look less like a pair of tramps and more like a driver and fireman. So I'm afraid we must trouble you for your overalls and caps."

Mutely glowering, the driver and fireman surrendered the garments, and Raffles and I, taking turns holding the rifle, put them on. Raffles found a clasp-knife in the pocket of his overalls. He told me to cut lengths from the rope that held down the tarpaulin on the nearest of the goods trucks. With the lengths of rope I bound the men's wrists behind them and hobbled their ankles, not too tightly.

"You'll soon be able to free yourselves," Raffles told the captives. "It's a pity trains are so rare on this line. You have a long walk ahead of you. But my friend and I have already done our share of walking, as you can see from the state our boots are in. Ah, well, fortunes of war! Ready, Bunny? Then come on!"

In overalls, mine soaking wet, and railwaymen's caps, we clambered up into the locomotive cab.

"Can you drive this thing?" I asked anxiously, as Raffles examined the controls.

"I begged many a ride on the footplate when I was a kid, Bunny. I was train mad," said Raffles. "This is an old London and South-Western Railway locomotive — 'Brockenhurst' class. I recognised it as soon as I saw it."

He manipulated various levers. Steam hissed, and with a chugging and rumbling, and a clank of couplings from the goods trucks, the locomotive began to move.

"Get busy with that shovel!" Raffles shouted to me, above the din. "D'you want to find us back in Pretoria, behind barbed wire again? Stoke up! Give me a head of steam!"

A wild exhilaration filled me as, with the shovel, I opened the door to the red glare and hellish heat of the firebox.

"Steam for the Raffles Special!" I shouted, and went to work shovelling coals from the bunker as the first train we had ever stolen began to gather speed.

The veldt was streaking past at a great rate when at last dawn broke over the endless expanse. My overalls had long since dried, my

face and hands were black, my muscles ached.

As the crystalline early light gave way to a shimmer of heat-currents, I glimpsed an isolated Boer farmhouse or two, and once we passed a distant wagon drawn by a plodding line of yoked oxen.

Hunger gnawing as the day wore on, I foraged in the locomotive toolbox, where I found the driver's and fireman's lunch-cans. As we gratefully munched black bread and biltong, and washed it down with good Dutch beer, I asked Raffles what he thought was in the goods trucks.

"Nothing of much value, Bunny," he said, his face as black and oily as my own, "or there'd have been more than one guard on the train."

Only once, in the great loneliness under the sun, did we see armed men — a group of horsemen, with bandoliers and slung rifles, who were near enough for me to see their stem, heavily-bearded faces.

"A Boer *kommando*," said Raffles.

He pulled the dangling cord of the steam-whistle to give them a cheery salute, but they made no acknowledgement, not so much as a wave.

"I'm afraid we'll find more of those fellows when we get to the Boer frontier station," Raffles said.

"So we crash through at speed?" I suggested.

"And get fired at?" said Raffles. "No, Bunny. Firing would alert the Portuguese over on their side, make them wonder what was wrong, and try to stop us to find out."

"But they're neutral, Raffles!"

"Would they take a neutral view of train-robbers, Bunny? We can't be sure, and I don't much like the. possibility of internment in Portuguese East for the duration."

"Oh, dear God!" I said.

Repeatedly, after that, I stopped shovelling coal, wiped sweat from my eyes with a bit of cotton-waste, and peered ahead anxiously through one of the two small round windows of the locomotive cab.

When at last I spotted, far ahead along the rails, a cluster of sheds come into view, my throat went dry. I saw the small figures of men, some of them on horseback. There seemed quite a lot of them — most of them armed, I noted, as Raffles slowed down our rate of approach and pulled the steam-whistle cord, loosing off three short blasts of greeting.

"Behave naturally!" Raffles shouted to me. "Stick your black face out with an affable smile, and wave as we pass through!"

"If we pass through!" I shouted back.

My heart thumped as I peered ahead through the round window. There was no barrier across the line. It stretched straight ahead,

between the sheds and the waiting men, into no-man's-land, as the locomotive chugged slowly, hissing exhaust-steam, into the little station — and kept moving.

I leaned out from the footplate, with a smile and a wave to the men as they watched the locomotive steam slowly past them, followed by the clanking goods trucks. I could see that the men were expecting the train to stop, but it was not until the guard's little van at the rear was gliding past them that I heard from one of the men a shout of surprised inquiry.

"They're shouting," I called to Raffles.

"Acknowledge," he called back.

I leaned out, looking back at the men, and nodding as though with vigorous understanding, at the same time waving to them in reassurance — and farewell.

None of them moved. They just seemed surprised. Their figures dwindled as Raffles opened the throttle a little and our speed discreetly increased.

"Now for the Portuguese, Bunny!"

Again our speed decreased, as we steamed, chugging sturdily, towards a cluster of small buildings with whitewashed walls, typically Portuguese. Raffles sounded our whistle, and I saw men emerging from the buildings — short, dark men in dusty green uniforms, with white cross-belts. and slung rifles.

As we steamed slowly past the soldiers, Raffles and I, from our respective sides of the locomotive cab, protruded our grimy faces, showing our teeth affably as we waved our greetings. One or two of the men waved back, amiably enough. But as the goods trucks went on clanking slowly past them, and the guard's little van followed, I was dreading an outburst of shouts — and, possibly, of shots.

Nothing of the kind happened. I could hardly believe my eyes as I looked back at the soldiers gazing after us in mild surprise as they receded behind us. I gave them a final wave and turned to Raffles.

"By God," I shouted, exultant, "we're through! We've done it!"

"Now for Beira," said Raffles, with a grin, "We'll take no risks of internment, When we get near town, we'll abandon this train for someone else to find and take in. Well sneak down to the dock area under cover of night and try smuggling ourselves aboard some ship, outward bound. Come on, now, stoke up! Give me steam!"

"Farewell to Oom Paul!" I yelled, as I seized the shovel again and the locomotive began to pound along, with quickening respirations and blasts of the whistle, on our journey to freedom.

When we finally reached London, after many delays, difficulties, and enforced wanderings, we learned that the hostilities in South

Africa were virtually over. Pausing only long enough to report at the Yeomanry depot, and to visit our civilian tailor in Savile Row, we went north at the invitation of a chap we had been at school with, a young Argyllshire laird called Kenneth Mackail, for a week's fishing.

"Ye bonnie banks and braes," Raffles remarked, as, his dark hair crisp, his tweeds immaculate, a pearl in his cravat, he leaned with me beside him on the rail of the little side-wheeler steamer plying up Loch Long from Glasgow to Dunoon, where Ken was to meet us. "How do they look to you, Bunny?"

"After all we've been through," I said, contemplating the northern sunshine mellow over the tranquil waters of the loch, and breathing the air redolent of the heather on the distant moors, "they look enchantingly peaceful to me."

"They'll be ringing with gunfire soon," Raffles reminded me. "It'll be the twelfth of August in a few days — the 'Glorious Twelfth,' when everybody comes north for the opening of grouse-shooting."

"I'm glad Ken Mackail doesn't own a moor," I said. "My war-worn nerves are only equal to a little quiet fishing."

Ken was waiting for us on the jetty at Dunoon. A slightly-built, wiry chap with sandy hair, he wore the kilt, with a dirk in his stocking. He had brought his dogcart, and the cob in the shafts trotted off with us sturdily on the long, jolting ride to Mackail Lodge, which was up among the moors.

"There's one thing," Ken said presently, as we clattered along, "which I feel I should mention. You chaps are just back from active service in South Africa, whereas I was out there — as you know — as correspondent for a newspaper with a strongly anti-war policy."

"Different people, different views," said Raffles, tolerantly. "In the main, Bunny Manders and I go through shot and shell with judiciously open minds."

"Absolutely," I said.

"I'm relieved to hear that," Ken said, in his rather serious way. "The fact is, I'm involved in a bye-election, down in Glasgow. I'm standing for Parliament on a platform of generous peace terms for the Boers. Polling will be on the fourteenth, so I'm afraid I shall be busy on the hustings, down in Glasgow, most of the time you're here. My ghillie Macpherson and his wife, my housekeeper, will look after you very well."

"We have no fears on that score, Ken," said Raffles.

"Absolutely not," I said.

The road, a rutted track corkscrewing up over the moors, was traversing now the edge of a gorge where, deep down on our left, a stream out of the highlands tumbled merrily over falls, foamed among rocks, and broadened out here and there into fishworthy pools. I was

mentally reviewing the salmon and trout lures in my fly-case when I saw another dogcart bowling down the track towards us with the horse at a rapid trot.

Narrow as the track was, the oncoming cart showed no sign of slowing down, and Ken said, “Quick! We shall have to get out!”

This we did, and Ken, going to the cob’s head, backed his cart up, precariously tilting, on to the steep heather slope on the right, just in time for the other cart to pass. A ramrod, hawk-nosed man in tweeds held the reins, at his side an attractive girl in a tam-o’-shanter.

As they clattered past with a wheel of their cart about an inch from the gorge-edge, we all three stood with our hats raised, but, for all the acknowledgment we got, we might just as well have kept them on.

“That was General Finlayson and his daughter Janet,” Ken said with a hint of bitterness, as we climbed back into his dogcart. “The General’s not long back from South Africa. He’s been put on the Retired List, and he’s standing against me, in this bye-election, on a platform of punitive peace terms to be imposed in Pretoria.”

“Bunny and I heard of him, out there,” Raffles said. “A real fire-eater!”

“He owns the Castle Crissaig moors, up above my little place,” said Ken. “He’s on his way now to catch the steamer to Glasgow, with Janet to see him off. He’s due to harangue shipyard workers tomorrow, along Clydeside. What did you think of Janet?”

“Conspicuously bonnie,” said Raffles.

“I hoped to marry her,” Ken said gloomily, “but the war ruined my chances. I wrote critically, in dispatches to the newspaper I represented, about the General’s harsh methods in the field. The result is, he regards me as a pacifist traitor, and it’s ruined me with Janet. But damn it, a man must stand by his beliefs — or what is he?”

“He’s certainly not a Scotsman,” Raffles said, “fit to wear the trousers — or, rather, the kilt — in his own house.”

Ken Mackail’s house was a typical old moorland lodge, hard by the brawling stream, which Raffles and I, next day, Ken having gone off early, to catch the steamer to Glasgow and the hustings, fished in the company of Ken’s ghillie, Macpherson, a gaunt man with an old retriever called Shoona perpetually at his heel.

“Well, Macpherson,” said Raffles, when, having caught nothing but a couple of small brown trout all morning, we sat in the heather to eat the sandwiches and drink the whisky put up for us by Mrs. Macpherson, “I’m afraid Mr. Manders and I seem to be a bit out of practice.”

“Ye canna tak’ fish, sir,” said Macpherson, “if there’s ower few fish in the watter.”

“So the fault’s not entirely ours?” said Raffles. “You set our minds at rest. But tell us, Macpherson, how d’you fancy Mr. Mackail’s chances in this bye-election?”

“ ’Deed, sir,” said Macpherson gloomily, “wi’out the Lunnon politeecian coming up to support him on the hustings makes awfu’ persuasive speeches to yon Glesga folk, I wouldnae gie a bawbee for the young laird’s chances. General Finlayson’s a dour opponent, an’ a gleg one, forbye, which is why there’s ower few fish in our watter.”

Raffles asked what General Finlayson had to do with the paucity of fish, and Macpherson said grimly that, if we were so minded, he would show us — after dark.

As it turned out, the night was far from dark. In fact, when we reached the high moor after a long, rough trudge alongside the tumbling stream, the moon was almost as bright as we has seen it over the South African veldt.

We now were on the Castle Crissaig grouse-moor, General Finlayson’s property, and Macpherson, with Shoona at his heel, warned us to watch out for the General’s gamekeeper, James Fraser, who, with the Glorious Twelfth not far off, was apt to be on the prowl.

“Wi’ a gun for poachers,” said Macpherson. “Bluidy James Fraser!”

Near a small corrie of rowan trees, a little old stone bridge cast a humpbacked shadow over the stream, which here flowed deep and fish worthy. Macpherson led us furtively on to the bridge and showed us a small iron wheel secured by a chain and a massive padlock. He explained that the wheel was used to raise and lower a fine-mesh metal grille. When the grille was lowered, as it was now, fish which had spanned in the upper waters of the stream, were unable to return downstream, through Ken’s water, to the loch.

“And this is General Finlayson’s little pleasantry?” Raffles asked.

“Aye,” said Macpherson. “He’s awfu’ grudgesome against Mr. Mackail.”

“Well,” said Raffles, examining the padlock, “I happen to have in my pocket a small implement that might, just possibly —”

“Hist!” said Macpherson. “Bluidy James Fraser! Quick, mak’ for yon rowans!”

The three of us, with the wise old Shoona at Macpherson, incredulous. “ ’Tis the and into the tree-shadowed come. Peering out, I saw in the moonlight a figure on a bicycle, lampless, approaching along the rough track through the heather.

“Och!” whispered Macpherson, incredulous. “ ’Tis the young leddy from Castle Crissaig!”

Reaching the bridge, the girl in the tam-o’-shanter laid down her bicycle, looked quickly around her over the moor, then ran on to the

bridge. Taking from her skirt-pocket what must have been a key, she unfastened the padlock. Through the chortling of the stream as it flowed fast under the bridge, I heard the jingle of the padlock-chain, then a grinding sound as she began, exerting considerable effort, to turn the iron wheel.

"She's raising the grille," I whispered.

"Letting many a fine fish through into Ken's water," Raffles murmured.

"Gowd help the lassie," Macpherson whispered, "if bluidy James Fraser comes roarin' on her like a wild man an' tells her feyther!"

For an hour Janet Finlayson remained on the bridge, glancing continually about her over the moonlit moor; then she wound the grille down again into the water, refastened the chain and padlock, and pedalled off on her bicycle.

"Now we know where her heart is," said Raffles. "This'll be good news for Ken!"

As we stepped out, elated, into the moonlight, we were all grinning, and I fancied that even Shoona was baring her canines with sly amusement.

Our fishing next day, on Ken's water, was unbelievable. Macpherson was bent under the weight of our creels. And in the evening, just in time for dinner, Ken turned up on a quick visit to see if we were enjoying ourselves. As buxom Mrs. Macpherson set a superb dish of salmon on the table, Raffles and I were waiting for Ken to comment on it, so that we could tell him to whose significant action we owed the noble repast.

But Ken seemed scarcely aware of what he was eating. He looked preoccupied, worried, and Raffles asked him if the election was not going well.

"A spectre's arisen for me," Ken admitted, "but I'm not going to depress you chaps with it — you're here to enjoy yourselves."

"We might enjoy a romp with a spectre," said Raffles. "Tell us about it."

It was the spectre of the written word. In one of his dispatches from South Africa to the anti-war newspaper he had represented, Ken had accused General Finlayson of ordering an entire Boer family, caught sniping from a farmhouse, to be severely flogged with a rhino-hide whip, a *sjambok*.

"I'd sent off the dispatch, written in my own hand," Ken told us, "by a route that bypassed the censor, when I found out that the story, though it seemed quite in character for General Finlay-son, wasn't true. Luckily, I was able to stop my dispatch from being published."

"Then what's the trouble?" Raffles asked.

The trouble, Ken explained, was that his manuscript on the

sjambok atrocity had not been destroyed by his newspaper, but filed; and he had now received a warning from a colleague on the newspaper that the manuscript had vanished from the files and somehow fallen into the hands of a newspaper that supported General Finlayson's candidature.

"According to my colleague," Ken said, "that newspapers sending one of its staff men up to Glasgow to confer with General Finlayson's election agent. That agent's as crafty as a fox. I wouldn't put it past him to have my story printed in pamphlets that seem to emanate from my own Election H.Q., and flood the constituency with them."

"And plant people at your meetings," Raffles said, "to ask you why, if the story were true, you suppressed it at the time?"

"Exactly! I couldn't deny I'd written the story. They have the evidence — my own manuscript," Ken said. "But it could be make to look that I'd raked it up now — a story I know to be false — to blackguard my political opponent. It could ruin my chances. Lesser things than this, just before a poll, have swung many an election."

"And polling's on the fourteenth?" Raffles said. "H'm! What's this journalist chap's name and when is he expected in Glasgow?"

"I don't know his name," Ken said, "but my colleague's pretty sure the chap'll be coming up to-morrow on the London-Glasgow express."

"The Cock o' the North," Raffles said thoughtfully. "And to-morrow being the tenth, a lot of important Londoners will be on that train, bound for the grouse-moors. As I recall, the Cock o' the North steams into Glasgow at eleven p.m. and most of the visitors on it put up for the night at that huge old hotel right alongside the station. H'm!"

He said no more on the matter, but next morning, when I went down to breakfast, Ken had already left to catch the steamer from Dunoon back to Glasgow, and I heard Raffles's voice from the kitchen. I was buttering a bannock hot from the oven when he came into the breakfast-room.

"What were you talking to Mrs. Macpherson about?" I asked.

"I was taking a look at her game larder, Bunny."

"Grouse-shooting doesn't start till day after to-morrow, Raffles. There can't be much in the larder yet."

"Only ground game," Raffles said, unfolding his napkin. "After you with the teapot, Bunny."

I was at a loss to divine his intentions when, on the steamer from Dunoon, we arrived that evening in Glasgow and booked in at the hotel adjoining the station. Familiar to every dedicated grouse-shooter, the huge old warren of a hotel was virtually deserted. We had

the echoing dining-room almost to ourselves. But at eleven o'clock, when we heard the Cock o' the North, dead on time, steam into the station next door, what a change came over the scene!

We were sitting, with our coffee and liqueur whisky, in saddlebag chairs loomed over by a castor-oil plant, in the vast gas-lit mausoleum of a hall, when suddenly the rank and fashion of London came streaming in, all talking in loud, confident voices, all tweed-clad, the ladies looking about them through their lorgnettes in search of old friends in the crowd, the men with their guncases and shooting-sticks and their setters, pointers, retrievers, and spaniels, all of which looked as if they had pedigrees at least as long as those of their owners.

"Keep an eye open for anyone who looks like a journalist," Raffles instructed me, through the din that was going on, the barking of dogs, the shrill yapping of a solitary Pekinese, the cries of well-bred delight as ladies kissed each other through their veils, and men with bluff shouts shook one another's hands heartily.

"As a social occasion," Raffles remarked, "only a Buckingham Palace garden party can compare with this, Bunny!"

"You've seen it before," I said, "but it's all new to me."

I was impressed, recognising many a face familiar to high Society.

With trains or steamers to catch at an early hour, bound for the moors further north and the sacred rites of the Glorious Twelfth on the day after, the distinguished Londoners soon started going upstairs in loud converse to their rooms, while venerable pageboys, each with the leashes of half-a-dozen dogs in either hand, hobbled downstairs with them to the basement kennels.

"I didn't notice anyone who looked particularly like a journalist," I said, as peace reigned once more in the hall.

"I'll see what I can find out at the desk, Bunny. Order us a couple of nightcaps."

When Raffles returned to me, there was a grey gleam in his eyes. "He's here, Bunny! There's a journalist in Room Three-o-one. That'll be our man. He's probably arranged to meet with General Finlayson's election agent first thing in the morning."

With a flash of enlightenment, I exclaimed, "But he's going to lose Ken's fatal manuscript during the night?"

"Shh!" said Raffles. "Come on, we'll take these drinks up to my room."

In his room, when he turned up the gaslight, I saw that his valise had been unpacked by the chambermaid, his nightshirt laid out neatly on the bed, a box of Sullivans and his favorite bedtime reading, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen,* placed conveniently to hand.

"These doors have bolts, Bunny," he said. "People in hotels are apt to bolt their doors, and bolts can be awkward to deal with. So, as

conspirators seem to have started a hare in this election, I thought we might as well take a leaf out of their books." He unlocked a small grip he had brought from Mackail Lodge. "This is from Mrs. Macpherson's game larder," he said, and held up, dangling by its ears, a fine hare.

"It's been paunched," he said, "and very well hung. Now, while we finish these drinks, the hotel will be settling down for the night. I'll leave you then for a short while. Wait for me here."

He was gone for about fifteen minutes, returning so suddenly that, with my nerves still on edge from our South African hardships, I sprang to my feet with a racing heart.

"Now then, Bunny," he said, "I've tried the door of Room Three-o-one, and it's bolted, as I thought it would be. So I've laid a good scent of hare on the carpets of all the stairs, landings, and corridors. There's only the night porter on duty, down in the lobby, and he's asleep already. Here's my dressing gown. Put it on over your clothes, slip down to the basement, and release the dogs. When turmoil ensues and people come out of their rooms to find out what's going on, I shall be watching my chance to slip into Room Three-o-one. Off you go, and I'll see you at breakfast — all being well."

"Oh, dear God!" I breathed.

On the stairs and in the broad corridors only an occasional gaslight had been left burning, dimly blue, as I stole down to the lobby. Most of the lights there had been turned off. The night porter was sound asleep in one of the saddlebag chairs. I tiptoed across the lobby and down stone stairs to the basement. I opened the kennels door.

Dimly I made out, in faint light filtering down from the lobby, the well-bred heads of setters, pointers, retrievers, and spaniels as they thrust them out between the bars of their cages to sniff at me in friendly inquiry.

"Good dogs, clever dogs," I whispered to them, as I opened cage after cage. "Go find the hare, dogs! Push him out! Hie on! Go seek!"

The Pekinese, waking with a startled snuffle, hurled scandalized yaps at me and, when I released him, immediately attacked my trouser-cuffs with sharp teeth and bloodcurdling snarls. But then he spotted the procession of hunting dogs, led by a fine Gordon setter, streaming up the stairs to the lobby, and immediately rushed with indignant yaps to take his rightful place, as oriental royalty, at the head of the exodus.

Normally mute in the chase, the well-trained hunting dogs, excited by their unfamiliar surroundings and the hysterical yapping of the Pekinese, so far forgot themselves, when they picked up the scent of the hare, as to give tongue — especially the Cocker, Springer, and Welsh water spaniels — with a fearful clamor. Through the din I

heard the wild shouting of the night porter.

When I reached the lobby, I saw the porter chasing the pack up the main staircase and whacking vainly at the tail-end dogs with a rolled-up newspaper. I followed unobtrusively.

In the dim-lit corridors, bedroom doors were opening on all sides. People were coming out in disarray and alarm, some carrying candlesticks, and all shouting at each other to know what was happening.

"Keep calm!" I called to them, as I hurried along the corridor. "There's nothing to fear, ladies! You'll be taken care of. Arrangements are being made!"

"What kind of arrangements?" demanded a man wearing a nightcap and carrying a candlestick.

"Adequate ones, m'lud, adequate ones," I assured him, recognising his fine, judicial features as those of a famous judge at the Old Bailey. "Calm the ladies, m'lud!"

I hurried on up to the next floor, where my own room was located. On this floor, too, though the shouting and barking of the main chase was now coming from the floor above, the third floor, confusion reigned.

Twisting and turning through the seething throng, I gained the refuge of my own room. I closed and bolted the door and, holding my breath, stood listening to the Uproar going on all over the hotel, but particularly, it seemed to me, on the floor above — the third floor.

Shaken and appalled, I wondered if Raffles could have been trapped, red-handed, in Room 301.

Not until long after the disturbance had died down did I fall at last into an exhausted slumber. I slept so heavily that, when I went down to breakfast, the grouse-shooting crowd had left to catch their trains and steamers northward to the various moors, and the great dining-room seemed deserted.

My heart sank. I feared the worst. But then I saw him. His tweeds immaculate, a pearl in his cravat, Raffles was breakfasting at a comer table — in the company, to my surprise, of Ken Mackail, wearing the kilt and a smiling face. I wondered uneasily what his presence portended.

"Ah, here's Bunny Manders," Ken said. " 'Morning, Bunny. I'm here at the hotel to meet with a political chap who's come up from London to speak in my support on the hustings today. I. ran into Raffles in the lobby here. He tells me you chaps came down from Mackail Lodge last night to see the Harry Lauder show at the theatre. How was the show?"

"The show?" I said. "Oh — most amusing — pawky, I believe is

the word."

"I've just been telling Raffles," Ken said, "I've got great news. General Finlayson called on me last night at the place I'm lodging at during the election campaign. He came to see me in case I'd heard any rumour of a conspiracy to make use against me of a certain war dispatch of mine — a dispatch which, as the General put it, he understood I'd had the decency to suppress when I realised it was untrue. He wanted me to know that, the moment he got wind of the conspiracy, he told his election agent that, unless he stopped the journalist who'd got hold of my manuscript from coming to Glasgow, and make him destroy the unfortunate dispatch, the General would take a horsewhip to the pair of them."

I swallowed with a dry throat. "The journalist — never *came?"* I faltered, with a furtive glance at Raffles. Meditatively buttering a finnan haddie, he did not meet my eyes.

"The fellow didn't *dare* come," Ken laughed. "God, what a fine man General Finlayson is, at heart! He's so ashamed of his election agent that he's suggested we call a truce to the election campaign just for to-morrow, the Glorious Twelfth, and celebrate the rites on his Castle Crissaig moor. He's invited me to bring my guests, too — that's you chaps. You'll come, of course, *and* stay over at Mackail Lodge until after the declaration of the poll, on the fourteenth. I insist!"

"We'll be delighted, Ken," Raffles said, "Now, Bunny, if we're to catch the next steamer back to Mackail Lodge and cast a fly or two—"

"Go ahead," said Ken. "Enjoy yourselves. I must wait here for the political chap from London who's come to help me."

I reached for the teapot with a palsied hand. But later my tone was grim when I demanded of Raffles, as we clattered in a hansom along Sauchiehall Street to the steamer dock, what had happened in Room 301.

"Something that gave me food for thought, Bunny," he said, in a strange tone. "I'll tell you about it when I've had time to think over its implications."

His withdrawn manner and knitted brows warned me not to pursue the matter with questions. I felt very uneasy. Even so, and despite the fact that we had not anticipated doing any shooting when we came north, the following day lived — for me — wholly up to its reputation as the Glorious Twelfth.

The sky was cloudless over the high moors of Castle Crissaig, the grouse were plentiful and strong on the wing. As a host, General Finlayson turned out to be surprisingly genial, and I noticed that the charming Janet made a point of acting as gun-loader for Ken Mackail. With Macpherson performing a like office for Raffles, and bluidy James Fraser for myself, while Shoona retrieved faultlessly to hand, I

added my quota of bangs to the gunfire resounding all over Scotland, on this great day, from the corries of Ben Lomond to the screes of John o' Groats.

With the thaw that had set in between Mackail Lodge and Castle Crissaig likely to be permanent, and Janet now as good as his, Ken was not noticeably depressed when, on the declaration of the poll on the fourteenth, a third candidate was elected to Parliament over the heads of Ken and General Finlayson.

In fact, it was as happy a young laird as ever wore the kilt whom Raffles and I left waving to us from the jetty at Dunoon when we went off on the steamer to Glasgow to catch the Cock o' the North express back to London.

"So, in any case," I remarked to Raffles, as we paced the deck of the little steamer, "that political chap who came up from London to speak for Ken made no great difference to the election result."

"Evidently not," Raffles agreed. "But something I learned gave me the shock of my life, Bunny!"

He offered me a Sullivan from his cigarette-case and, lighting up, we leaned with our arms on the rail, alongside the paddle-wheel rumbling and splashing in its housing.

"As you know, Bunny," Raffles said, "they told me at the hotel desk that the man in Room Three-o-one was reputed to be a journalist. Well, when you released the dogs in your clever way, the chap came out in his nightshirt to see what was happening. I was able to slip into his room for a few uninterrupted minutes. There were various documents littered on the bedside table. Ken's manuscript was not among them, so it wasn't the man we were looking for — he was Ken's political chap. But I did find a newspaper article ringed round in blue pencil. I skimmed through it hastily, and realised at once that it was about the occupant of the room himself."

"The occupant?" I said.

Raffles nodded. "He was a journalist, right enough, Bunny. The article said he'd been a war correspondent in South Africa, was captured by the Boers, and, because he also held a cavalry commission, was put in the P.O.W. camp at Pretoria. That's the same camp as we were in, with several thousand others, and he evidently escaped a few days after us. The article said he hid among empty coal-sacks in the tarpaulin-covered goods truck of a train on the Pretoria-Beira line."

My heart began to thump.

"He was in dread," said Raffles, "that the train would be stopped and searched for him at the Boer frontier station, but, as he peered from his hiding-place, he saw that the train was passing through slowly, first the Boer station, then the Portuguese station, *without*

stopping!"

My scalp tingled. "The Raffles Special!" I breathed.

"The evidence, I think, is conclusive," Raffles said. "We had a clandestine passenger, Bunny, who was on board when we stole that train. Evidently he didn't see what happened at the water-tower, but when the train went through into Portuguese East *without stopping,* he was convinced — according to the newspaper article — that Providence was watching over him, especially as the Boer High Command had offered a reward for his recapture."

"A reward?" I said. "Oom Paul offered a reward?"

"He didn't offer a reward for you and me, Bunny," Raffles said, with a wry smile, "but the Boers offered twenty-five pounds for our passenger's recapture, dead or alive."

"Only twenty-five pounds?" I exclaimed. "He can't have been particularly important!"

"As to that, Bunny, the newspaper article refers to him as a young statesman with a brilliant future before him. One can never tell, of course. Such things are on the knees of the gods."

He dropped his cigarette over the side and looked thoughtfully across the waters of Loch Long at the banks and braes gliding by, bonnie in the mellow northern sunshine.

"Who knows, Bunny?" said A. J. Raffles. "Perhaps you and I will prove to have been on the knees of the gods when we stole, you stoked, and I drove the train that carried young Mr. Winston Spencer Churchill to safety."

Designated Murderer
by Jon L. Breen [6]

A new Ed Gorgon story by Jon L. Breen

Ed Gorgon, you will remember, is a major-league umpire with a flair for solving crimes on and off the baseball diamond. This time murder follows him to a hunting and fishing lodge in Canada, far from the ball parks where Ed Gorgon officiates. But this big-league umpire doesn't need his professional locale to call a quick decision on a close play...

By the time this new designated-hitter rule went into effect in the American League — the one that says a club cam use a batter in place of the pitcher throughout the game — Cal Meadows's playing career was long over. But anybody who ever saw Cal play, or try to play, first base will realize how old Cal would have loved the opportunity to hit in a game and not field.

As a hitter, Cal had a picture swing and devastating power. As a fielder, he had bad hands and slow reflexes, sometimes no reflexes. His hitting kept him in the majors — and in the lineup — for ten years, but his fielding had him out of most games by the seventh inning. Compared to Cal Meadows, old Dick Stuart was a Golden Glove.

Now you may remember, friends, that sometime back I told you — I'm Ed Gorgon, cursed and booed major-league ump these last 25 years — about a murder case in which there was a dying message that the policeman in charge couldn't interpret because he didn't know baseball. This story is different — this time the officer of the law running things knew too much about baseball.

Cal Meadows and I became pretty good friends after his retirement from baseball, and I sometimes go up in the off season to a little hunting and fishing lodge he runs near Lake Dubois, up in Canada. I've got no taste for the hunting, but I do like a little fishing — why there should be any difference between the two I can't say, but to me there is. And I like the peace and quiet.

One night it's not so quiet. I'm lying in my cabin at about ten in the evening and I hear a shot — loud. Hunters don't generally go out at night, preferring to shoot each other in the daytime, and anyway

they never shoot so near the cabins and the lodge, so I jump out of bed in some alarm. I see a shadowy figure ducking out of the cabin next door. He vanishes between two other cabins and I don't feel like giving chase, judging from the indicated presence of a deadly weapon.

Instead I rush into the cabin next door, and I find what I fear most. My neighbor, Joe Conlin, is lying there twitching, the whole front of him a bloody mess. He stares up at me, his face white, and with a big effort he manages to get out, quite clearly, "E3."

Then he loses consciousness, for good. By now there are others at the cabin door, including Cal Meadows and Dr. Fleming, a vacationing GP, who takes charge quickly, but of course it's too late.

I don't know anything about this Joe Conlin, though I learned his name and passed the time of day with him the day before. He was a pleasant enough though taciturn fellow with very close-cropped blond hair and an air of wanting to escape. Now, one way or another, he has.

"Did you know him, Cal?" I ask Cal Meadows.

"No, just his name, You're the only guest I know personally, Ed, except the judge. Who could have killed this guy? Who knew him?"

He looks around at the faces of the other guests, who all look fairly blank. Most are wearing bathrobes over pajamas, as Cal and I are, and look cold. There is only one married couple, the Spandlers, who apparently are having a second honeymoon. He's a slight mild-looking guy; she's a red-haired beauty, better than you'd expect him to do. There's a kid of about 22 whose name I don't know — I saw him arriving the previous day with an Army duffel bag for luggage. We had talked briefly, and when he found out I was an umpire he showed me a baseball he got autographed by Willy Mays once years ago — Mays had hit a hard foul ball right into the kid's glove. The kid had an Army PFC's uniform with him, in a transparent cleaner's bag.

Then there's Judge Warbleton, a regular at the lodge. The old gent looks magisterial even in a bathrobe — he's stopped to put his teeth in on the way, though. "Have the police been notified, Cal?" he asks.

Cal groans. "Oh, yeah. I'll probably have Bosworth to deal with." He means Sergeant Bozzy Bosworth of the local RCMP, an old fishing companion of mine whom Cal has never gotten along with. He starts back toward the main building, calling over his shoulder, "I wish this place had a designated manager tonight."

The judge suggests to the other gaping guests that they return to their cabins, but not to go back to bed because the police will want to question them. They start drifting back, and it occurs to me that if one of them is the killer he'll probably have some track-covering to do.

The judge asks, "Did he say anything before he died, Ed?"

“He said, ‘E3,’ just before he died.”

“E3? Means nothing to me,” the judge says.

“Cal would be grateful,” I say under my breath.

“Cal? What do you mean? Is he involved in this somehow?”

“I doubt it, Judge, I doubt it.”

But would Bozzy Bosworth doubt it? He and Cal are not just friendly enemies. They really don’t care for each other. Bad chemistry, I guess, because I like them both.

Before he even questions anybody else, Bosworth is regaling me with his theory. Bozzy is a baseball fan from way back, and he seems delighted it’s finally come in handy in his work.

“Tell me, Ed,” he says, “what do you think of that E3?”

“I don’t know,” I say. Let him have his fun.

“Come on. What do you think it could mean?”

“Sounds like a code name. For a secret agent maybe.”

Bozzy chortles. “Yeah? What else?”

“It could be somebody’s license number. In some states you can pay extra, pick your own, and make it short if you want or—”

“Yeah, sure, Ed. Hear any cars driving up here or driving away the last few hours?”

“No. I’m just telling you some of the possibilities that occur to—”

“Yeah, okay. Anything else?”

“Could be map coordinates. Some kind of location for something.”

“Like buried treasure?”

“Well, I don’t know.”

“Ed, I know you and Cal Meadows are buddies. But surely you’ve seen the most obvious thing it can mean.”

“What’s that?”

“E3, in baseball scoring, means error on the first baseman. And what first baseman ever made more errors than Cal Meadows? Huh? Answer me that.”

“It doesn’t figure, Bozzy.” Time to spoil his fun.

“Why not?”

“The man’s dying. He doesn’t have time to be clever or devious. If he wants to implicate Cal Meadows, he’d just say Meadows or Cal, not come up with something like E3.”

“Maybe he knows him as E3. Maybe it was a nickname.”

I shake my head. “Doesn’t wash. Nobody ever called Cal E3 as a nickname. I don’t think he’d like it.”

“You’ve got a better idea, I suppose? Map coordinates! Where’s the map then? License plate! Secret agent! This amateur detective reputation must be doing funny things to your head, Ed.”

I laugh a little at that. “Maybe. I’ve got a simpler explanation, though. What do we know about Joe Conlin?”

"Not a thing yet."

"He had very short hair. Could he have been an Army officer?"

"Lots of people have short hair, Ed," Bosworth says. "We ain't all hippies and weirdos. I myself am not eligible for a job in a rock band. I mean, just 'cause he had short hair—"

"Okay, okay. The little I saw of him, though, he struck me as the type. Now there's a young fellow here with an Army uniform in his closet—"

"Canadian Army?"

"U.S. Army."

"Well, I'm sure he's a fine young man, serving his country."

"Perhaps so. But you better see if he's still in the Army — check his discharge record if any."

"Why would he have his uniform with him if he's discharged?"

"Why would he have it with him anyway if he's on leave, discharged or hot? Nobody in the Army wears his uniform off duty any more. They always wear civvies."

"So I can ask about his status. But what's the point?"

"The kid's a PFC. The Army pay grade for PFC is E3, Bozzy. If Conlin, an Army man, sees a kid in a PFC uniform he doesn't recognize or know by name that's just the way he *would* identify him! E3 — straight and to the point."

"Wait a second, Ed, we don't even know Conlin was ever in the Army. And why would the kid kill him? And why in the world would he wear the uniform?"

The kid answers those for us a little later. He's just sitting in his cabin waiting to be arrested. Hasn't even tried to hide the gun.

"I wanted Major Conlin to know who killed him — not me as an individual, but as an enlisted man. It wouldn't be enough just to let him know somebody hated him, wanted him dead — he had to know it was a non-lifer PFC. You get it? That's why I brought the uniform with me when I followed him here.

"After I killed him, I raced back to the cabin, took off the uniform, and came back to join the crowd investigating the. shot. I had some idea about not letting people know it was me, but when I got back here, I found I just didn't care any more."

The kid's name was Bill Lake. He'd been in Major Joseph Conlin's company in Vietnam. A recent discharge for psychiatric reasons. It turned out Conlin had been asked to resign his commission for making a pile of money out of the Saigon black market. An officer but not a gentleman. According to Lake, Conlin was responsible for the death of a Vietnamese girl whom Lake had fallen in love with and wanted to bring back to the states.

Cal Meadows still has the lodge and still looks longingly at the

paper at the exploits of Orlando Cepeda, Tony Oliva, Deron Johnson, and the other designated hitters, a position he'd rather play than first base *or* designated murderer.

Guest in the House
by Edith Summers Kelley{©1974 by Davis Publications, Inc.}

Discovery

first publication of a 50-year-old story

Edith Summers Kelley, described as "an American writer of the naturalist school," published only one book in her lifetime — a novel titled WEEDS, which appeared in 1923. The book was praised by Sinclair Lewis, Joseph Wood Krutch, Floyd Dell, and Upton Sinclair, but ignored by the reading public, and both the novel and its author were forgotten.

Nearly half a century later Professor Matthew J. Bruccoli of the University of South Carolina, a Professor of English and an authority on Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, found a copy of WEEDS, read it, and was tremendously impressed. He persuaded the Southern Illinois University Press to reissue the book, which the Press did in November 1972; and again the novel was acclaimed by a few and ignored by the many. But one of the author's three children, Patrick Kelley, bought a copy of the new edition of WEEDS, got in touch with Professor Bruccoli, and informed him that there was a bundle of his mother's unpublished manuscripts (in the attic? in the cellar?), including a second novel and some short stories.

Once again Professor Bruccoli became a literary midwife. The second novel, titled THE DEVIL'S HAND, is scheduled for publication by the Southern Illinois University Press this summer. We are grateful to Professor Bruccoli for sending us one of Mrs. Kelley's unpublished short stories, and we are trying to synchronize its appearance in *EQMM* with the issuance of Mrs. Kelley's second novel. Professor Bruccoli tells us that the short story was written "prior to 1925," which means it has taken fate 50 years to bring about the publishing of this story.

We have made only minimal alterations in the text supplied by Professor Bruccoli — some corrections and changes in spelling and punctuation, some breaking up of extra-long paragraphs, and a change in the title (the original title, we thought, was too revealing). The story itself is truly in the naturalist school, full of realistic detail of its period and place; it illuminates Mrs. Kelley's affinity for nature, and

her precise ear for regional dialogue, in the Mark Twainian sense of dialect and speech patterns. Mrs. Kelley, in her autobiographical note discovered with the unpublished manuscripts, described this story as "grim." Yes, as old age and poverty and vanishing dreams and life itself are grim...

Old Andy Van Anda was sitting in the kitchen of his farmhouse smoking his pipe and thinking about his daughter, Jenny, one golden autumn afternoon, when a shadow darkened the band of sunlight that fell obliquely from the open door. That shadow was destined to darken every day of life that remained to him. He raised his eyes and saw Joe Titman standing in the doorway.

Ever since his wife's death, old Andy had lived alone in this blackened old farmhouse up against the mountain range that lifted its bristling spine between northern New Jersey and Pennsylvania. At first his other two daughters had taken turns at coming every day to "redd up." Then Lena's man got a chance to sell his place and moved to Upjohn, where there was work to be had in the brickyard.

After Lena moved away, Tillie, the other daughter, got to coming less and less often. And indeed one could hardly blame her, for her place was a good two miles from her father's. His bed was now hardly ever made and the pillowslip grew browner and browner. His stove, the polished pride of his wife's heart, grew caked with rust and spatterings. The old rag carpet, once kept so neat and clean, was greasy around the table and the stove, and so filled with dust that when Tillie did try to sweep it the broom thickened the air with a gray cloud.

The oilcloth on the table cracked and tore and grew smeary and sticky. Dust settled thickly on all the shelves, on the top of the eight-day clock, on the china slipper, on the flat vase with roses on the front and a piece broken out of the back. An old plate, chipped and crazed, a heavy cup and saucer, brown with coffee stains, and a wooden-handled knife and fork were the only dishes that the old man ever used. These he rinsed out after each meal and left turned upside down on the smeary oilcloth.

It was in the doorway of this house that Joe Titman stood on that fateful autumn afternoon.

Joe was a tall, bony vagabond, long since grown old in bachelorhood, who in his day had been a great fighter and hunter and a mighty woodsman. Even now, though his shaking hand spilled the coffee as he lifted the saucer to his lips, there was no one along the

mountainside who could swing the broadaxe with such clean strokes, such fine precision.

Old Andy Van Anda had always disliked Joe Titman; but when he saw him standing there in the doorway he was glad to see him. For some time now he had been thinking of trying to get Joe to help him cut ties. His place of 160 acres was no good for farming any more. As he grew feebler and less ambitious he had worked the tillable fields less and less. The strength had gone out of his arms and out of the land and it had been left to grow up in weeds and brush and clumps of young birches.

There was scant pasture left for a team of horses and a few sheep. But in the rocky wood lots that skirted the base of the mountain there grew fine tall chestnuts and noble oaks. They had been growing there when the old man was a pink, satin-skinned baby. They had been big trees when he had brought his bride there more than 50 years ago. Nearly every winter he had cut down a few of them, hewed them into railroad ties, and hauled them to Branchville. But the prices had nearly always been poor; and for his load of ties that it had taken days to cut and hew and a fourteen-hour day to haul to Branchville, he would come back with little more than a sack of feed, a bag of flour, a few plugs of chewing tobacco, a couple of pounds of sugar, and perhaps a few drinks of whiskey in his belly.

Now, however, since everything else had gone up, he had heard that ties were bringing a better price. He had to do something to get money to pay his taxes and finish paying for his wife's tombstone. So when Joe Titman shambled into his kitchen this autumn afternoon, with a few things tied in a bundle on the end of a stick, and asked for a drink of cider, Andy felt him out tentatively on the subject of their going into partnership.

"They say ties is like to fetch a fair price this winter," he hazarded, as he poured Joe's third glass of cider from a broken-nosed pitcher that had once been part of a bedroom set.

"Like enough. Everything else's high enough," said Joe and gulped the cider.

"I got a mighty good lot o' oaks and chestnuts," said Andy, as Joe was emptying his fifth glass. "They're easy to git out too, an' handy to the road, an' they'd make prime, fust-class ties that 'ud fetch the top price."

"Top price nuthin'," grumbled his guest. "There ain't no ties ever fetches the top price. The buyers does the gradin' an' they alius calls 'em seconds. The seller ain't got no more chanct 'n a rabbit."

When Joe had finished his seventh glass and the pitcher was empty, Andy suggested, "Anyway, we might walk out, Joe, an' have a look at them trees."

Joe continued to sit for a few deliberate moments, saying nothing, then slouched indifferently to his feet.

"Waal, I don't mind havin' a look at 'em afore I take to the road agin."

Together they plodded out, two gray and tattered old scarecrows, into the glory of the autumn afternoon. As they passed through the calm, suffused beauty, grasshoppers sprang before their feet and bees buzzed drowsily about them. The wood lots were a blaze of color: gold of the oaks and chestnuts, scarlet of the maples, deep green of the singing pines. The great trees rose, stately and proud, against a deep blue sky. Over the lower lands that sloped to the swamps, the pale yellow and deep crimson of the dwarf poplars and sumachs shimmered in a thin gold mist.

None of these things was commented on by Andy Van Anda and his guest except the late grasshoppers.

"It's a sign of a warm fall," said Joe Titman, eyeing the little darting creatures.

"An' makes good fattenin' fer the hens," added Andy.

Arrived among the big trees, they loitered about looking them over in appraisive silence.

"Some mighty fine trees there," said Andy at last.

"Oh, purty fair," answered Joe indifferently.

They turned and walked back to the house in silence.

Andy brought up another pitcher of cider. Joe poured himself a glass and gulped it with relish. It was more than commonly good cider. Andy spoke suddenly out of a dead silence.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Joe. I'll give you a straight half of what the ties fetches an' pay half the haulin'. That's as good a deal as anybody ever give a tie cutter, an' you know it." The old man puffed vigorously on his pipe, breathless and flustered over so long a speech and so definite a proposal.

"I ain't much interested in tie cuttin' these days," confided Joe, as he poured himself another glass of cider.

There was a long and deep silence. When at last Andy spoke he had to clear his throat and his voice was husky.

"Well then, how'd it be if I paid three-fourths o' the haulin?"

Nonchalantly Joe got to his feet. "It's funny," he said, "but somehow this fall I don't seem to feel no itch to cut ties. I reckon I'll be steppin' along." He reached for the stick with all his worldly possessions tied on the end.

An expression of pained surprise spread over the little old man's wizened features. He had half expected this, yet it came as a disagreeable shock. There was just one card left for him to play, a card that he had been holding back in the hope that he would not have to

use it. Now it must be laid face up on the table. How he shrank from using this last card. For years his privacy had been growing more and more dear to him.

"I say now, Joe," he spoke rapidly, almost feverishly, as if arrived at a decision which he was afraid he might revoke if he thought it over, "you could stop right here at my place while you cut them ties, use one o' my upstairs beds, my stove an' sech an' I wouldn't charge you a cent."

Joe paused with the stick already over his shoulder. "You do all the haulin', Andy, an' I'll take you up on that," he said at last. "Your cider allus was a bit better'n common."

And that was how it came about that Joe Titman lived with Andy Van Anda.

The first load of ties was a decided success. Joe had taken the pick of the woods and they were straight as new nails, beautifully hewn and every one of them more than a full foot faced. And though the buyer at Branchville managed to rate a good half of them as seconds, still they brought a price that set a gleam of avaricious joy dancing in old Van Anda's eyes and permitted Joe Titman to pay an unthinkable price for a gallon of whiskey. They dickered a good deal about the cost of the hauling. Old Van Anda tried to go back on his bargain and at last Joe humored him by agreeing to go fifty-fifty.

The trouble began after the hauling of the last load. Van Anda, excited by the high price that the ties had brought, wanted to begin bright and early next morning to saw down more trees. But Joe was lethargic, irritable, and moody and would not stir from the kitchen stove where he sat with his feet in the oven, chewing tobacco, whittling at a bit of stick and occasionally lifting the lid to spit into the blaze. Joe had drunk freely the day before and the old man put it down to a morning-after grouch and "left him set."

The next day Joe, who had bought shells at Branchville, pulled out from beneath his straw tick the shotgun which was one of the few things he carried with him wherever he went, and began cleaning it. Old Van Anda watched him with narrowed, furtive eyes.

"Be we a-goin' to the woods this mornin', Joe?" he hazarded at last.

"I be," answered Joe without hesitation. "I'm a-goin'huntin."

There was a long silence

"But how about them ties?" asked old Andy, with sudden, querulous directness.

"I reckon they won't spile for waitin' a spell," drawled Joe, squinting critically down one barrel of the gun. "They've stud there since long afore you an' me was born. I figger they ain't a-goin' to rot away overnight."

Old Andy felt himself trembling all over with a futile exasperation, like the frustrated irritability of a child. But he said nothing, only grunted slightly.

He was somewhat mollified when Joe returned that afternoon with three rabbits and several quail.

The days lengthened into weeks, and still Joe Titman could not be induced to take his end at the crosscut saw. When he felt so disposed, he sat all day by the kitchen stove, chewing, whittling, and spitting into the blaze. On other days he took his gun and went into the woods or paid visits to the neighbors whom he would help with the hog killing, the wood hauling, or whatever big job happened to be afoot.

"Aw hell, what's the youst?" he would say, lifting one great shoulder in an indifferent shrug whenever old Van Anda mentioned ties.

The old man fretted and fumed, chafed and worried, but Joe went his way, composed, silent, and inscrutable. Toward dark he would stalk into the kitchen, open up the tin biscuit box in which he kept his loaf of bread, his coffee and sugar, and make himself some supper. If he had shot a rabbit or a woodchuck, or if somebody had given him a hog's pluck for helping with the killing, he shared it generously with Andy.

But Andy never shared anything with him except the cider of his cellar, which is an unheard-of thing to withhold from anyone who is in your house. The two rarely ate at the same time, and each kept to his own end of the table and washed his own dishes, Joe using a tin plate and cup that he had carried about with him for years.

It was well into the winter when Joe, having no money left to buy bread and tobacco, went into the woods with Andy and cut and hewed another load of ties. The money that he earned by this spurt of energy lasted him until early spring.

Through the summer there were gardens from which one could always pilfer a few carrots and potatoes, there were dewberries and huckleberries, cherries and apples. Joe got along very nicely. When he ran out of money he helped some neighbor for a day or two with the haying or the potato digging. Of an evening he smoked his pipe in silent serenity on the shambling old kitchen porch, watched the sunset smolder into magenta and gray, heard after rain the pleasant singing of the frogs and in the dry days of late summer the shrill locust chorus. On the farthest end of the porch old Andy sat and smoked with short, irritable puffs. Scarcely ever did they exchange a word from dawn till dark.

Once, as they sat thus, Joe Titman spoke out of a dead silence.

"You ain't heard from Jenny lately?"

The old man stirred, took his pipe out of his mouth.

"I ain't heard from Jenny in over twenty year."

There was nothing more said. When it grew dark Andy retired into the house and to bed. Joe sat a little longer, then creaked slowly and heavily up the attic stairs.

Andy had been thinking of Jenny when Joe spoke, as he nearly always did when he nursed his pipe of an evening. Over him there had swept a hot surge of fury against this man who seemed to have read his mind. Was nothing of his, not even his own thoughts, sacred from this prying presence? He had been thinking of Jenny, his youngest and favorite daughter, Jenny's sunny curls and happy blue eyes, Jenny's laughter and bubbling gaiety, Jenny's endearing ways. When she was 17 she had gone to the city to find work. For the first months they had had a few letters from her. Then silence.

The fall passed and it was winter again, and not a word did Joe Titman say about ties. As before, when he was out of money he did a day's work or so. To old Andy's infinite exasperation, he even hewed some ties for Tom Biddle on the adjoining farm.

More and more it got on old Van Anda's nerves. It was his first thought when he awoke in the pitch blackness of the early morning and the last that glimmered out of his mind at night. He dreamed about it too. Gradually he ceased to fret about the uncut ties and gave his whole thought to a daily growing resentment at the presence of this guest, which had grown to become an unspeakable violation of his cherished privacy and the sanctity of his home.

Every movement that the intruder made was an offense to him, every sound an insult. He loathed the sound of the coffee gurgling through Joe's lips and clenched his hands in exasperated rage when he began to suck his teeth. The sight of his hat hanging on its nail was a personal affront.

More and more the old man nursed the thought of his home as a sacred place, sacred to himself and his memories. In the toil-filled and fretful days of his life as a husband and father he had not given much thought to his wife except to grumble at her if the meals were not ready or the milking was not done on time. Toward the two older girls, who had grown before his eyes into drab and hardened farm women, fatherly pride and affection had gradually ebbed away. Only Jenny had remained always next to his heart.

But of late years, now that he had much time to sit and think, the outcasts had crept back and sat once more with Jenny in the shrine of memory. He found his mind constantly slipping away to three cornsilk-haired little girls who had flitted in and out of the dooryard, played tag in the meadow, and gathered dandelions and daisies along the roadside. His wife he no longer saw as the wizened, shrill-voiced crone who, somewhat to his relief, had died full of years and ailments.

He remembered her now as a young woman with brown curls clinging about her temples and sweet blue eyes. It was the sweetness of the deep blue eyes and the way the brown curls clung about her temples that had made him mad about her. He remembered it all so well. For years and years he had forgotten it as though it had never been. Now it all seemed like yesterday. And then would float before him the face of Jenny as he had last seen it, Jenny at 17.

Through the long winter evenings the two old men sat opposite each other, one on each side of the rusty stove, their heads sunk between their hunched shoulders. From time to time, old Van Anda, with the air of one who is master there, lifted the stove lid and put in more wood. As he did so, he glanced with narrowed eyes at the great bony frame that bulked in silence and took no notice, then sank into his chair with a sound that was half a mutter, half a sigh.

The air was hot and stale and heavy with tobacco smoke. The old, blackened cast-iron kettle purred and steamed. The clock ticked loudly into the silence. On moonless nights the uncurtained window was only a black oblong; but when the moon shone it showed the irregular fringe of icicles hanging from the eaves, showed Andy's fields stretching away smooth and white under deep snow to the dark pines that lifted somber spires against the base of the mountain. The smoky glimmer of the little glass lamp lighted little more than the table upon which it stood. Mysterious curtains of shadow shrouded the comers of the room. The kettle purred and steamed. The clock ticked loudly into the silence.

As they sat thus night after night, old Andy's thoughts traveled always in the same circle, dwelt upon his wife in her youth, his children as babies, Jenny as a lovely blossom of girlhood. Here in this very room his Nettie, the girl he had courted, had bustled about from stove to table making aromatic coffee, frying griddle cakes and bacon that tasted so good when the day's work was done. On this floor his children had crawled as babies, run about as little girls. He could see their rosy faces now around the table. At this very door he had seen for the last time Jenny's lovely flashing smile. How different it had all been in those days, how clean and bright and cheerful. And now—

If Joe had been a widower the situation would have been eased. The thoughts of each, like parallel tracks, could have gone on forever without touching. Andy could have felt secure and alone in his memories. But this old buzzard had done nothing all his life but fight and hunt and fish. What could he have to look back upon?

In the midst of his broodings the old man had a constant, uneasy feeling that those evil eyes were leering into his past, that those sinister lips were sneering at it. At the same time he felt a deep resentment that Joe could have no sympathy with his feelings. This

filthy varmint that reeked of whiskey and sweat and worse, what could he know about the deep heartbreak of losing your children, seeing them grow old and cranky before your very eyes, having them snatched from you in the blossom time of youth?

By constantly dwelling upon it Andy came to think of Joe as the cause of all his vague regrets, his emptiness, his sense of loss and frustration. Each night his mind followed the same train of thought, each night it returned to the hulking mass on the other side of the stove with an intensified bitterness, rage, and hate. If he could only get rid of him. If he could only have his house to himself.

Sometimes, when he felt sure Joe Titman was far away from the house, he took the key from the nail where he had always kept it ever since his wife died, unlocked the door of the best room, and went inside to commune with the shadows that had once been his reality.

A heavy staleness weighted the air. When the old man partly raised the blind, the shaft of sunlight that came in showed the comers of the room hung with cobwebs. The chairs stood primly at right angles to the wall, tidies on their backs. The coarse lace curtains hung heavy with dust, tied back by tatters of ribbon that had once been pink.

On the stiff sofa were pillows covered with silk patchwork so thick with dust that the colors were scarcely visible. On the whatnot in the corner some little trinkets, a china boy in knee breeches, a tea cup and saucer, a child's bank and a few shells and bits of flint arrowheads wore the universal dress of dust. On a crocheted tidy that was spread over a marble-topped table, the great embossed family Bible that had been handed down to him from his grandfather lay smothered in dust. In it was the record of his birth, of his marriage to Nettie, of the birth of his three girls. The knowledge that these events were inscribed there seemed to give them an importance, a solidity and permanence that was reassuring. It was somehow comforting to reflect that they stood there in black and white to show that it had not all been a dream.

It was at three photographs on the center table and a crayon enlargement on the wall that the old man stood and gazed, moving his eyes slowly from one to the other. One was a picture of his wife in her white wedding dress. She was sitting in a big plush chair, and he was standing beside her slightly to the rear with his hand on her shoulder. How well he remembered the day that picture had been taken. How had he managed to forget it all these years? There were photographs of Lena and Tillie when they were little tots, and there was a crayon enlargement of Jenny at 16. He had had the enlargement made just after she went away.

After he had looked the pictures over, it was always to this crayon

enlargement that he returned, standing gazing at it fixedly. It was all that remained to him of Jenny. Jenny had not been like the other girls, quiet and gentle. Jenny had been like a rainbow, like a sunbeam, always laughing, always singing.

After she went away how empty and silent the old house had been. Dear God, how he had missed Jenny! On the face there was a charming smile, a merry, arch look in the eyes. The old man saw these, but mostly he saw the unutterably lovely line of the young cheek and chin, and there was something about this that tore his heart. Sometimes before the picture he would break into convulsive weeping. Jenny!

One evening at dark, when he came in from feeding the hogs, he was struck with amazement to see the door of the best room standing ajar. He was carrying an armful of stove wood which he had picked up as he passed the woodpile. The wood crashed from his relaxed arm and scattered over the floor. At the noise a light in the best room wavered and there was a slight sound of movement. The little man turned and went into the room.

Joe Titman was there standing before the center-table with the lamp in one hand and Nettie's picture in the other. The stale air was full of the whiskey smell that came from his breath.

Old Andy, struck speechless, stood and glared at him, When at last he found breath he shrieked in a shrill, outraged tremolo of hate and fury the words that for so long he had been burning to say.

"Git outa my house!"

The great hulk that called itself Joe Titman lurched unsteadily and the lamp slanted over so far that the chimney almost fell off. The flame licked up and smoked, then settled again. Painstakingly, with numb and palsied fingers, he set the lamp on the table and turned and faced his host.

"Whatcha say, Andy?"

"Git outa my house!" The voice was shriller, more tremulous with seething rage. Joe Titman leered evilly.

"Git out, yuh say?" A sardonic chuckle came from somewhere deep down in his throat. "Let be, Andy. No youst fer you to git all het up. I was allus the best man of us two, Andy. No little pipin' grasshopper like you is a-goin' to make me git out if I ain't got a mind to. I'm here till I'm ready to quit. Git that, Andy?"

He fixed the old man's angry little eyes with a bleary, contemptuous stare.

Old Andy bristled like an enraged bantam cock challenging a bird three times his size. "You set down that pitcher, Joe Titman. That pitcher ain't got nuthin' to do with you. That's my wife."

Joe Titman made a strange sound that was mingled of a sneer, a

hiccough, and a mocking laugh.

"Air yuh sure o' that, Andy?" He peered fixedly at the little man. "Air yuh sure Nettie Waters wasn't never nuthin' to no mar. but you? There's things a man can't be too sure about, Andy. Yuh remember I was a heap better-lookin' lad nor you, Andy, a heap taller, stronger, lavisher with money. All these nights while we been a-settin' in there by the stove, I been thinkin' it over, how much likelier a man I was nor you, Andy, how much better Nettie Waters liked me nor she did you. She married you outa spite. Andy, 'cause her an' me had a failin' out. Yuh didn't know that afore, did yuh, Andy? Some things a man waits till he's got one foot in the grave afore he knows the rights of 'em. An' after she'd got over bein' mad at me, she come back to me, Andy. Thai youngest girl, Jenny, in the big pitcher on the wall is *my* girl."

With a terrible cry the little old man sprang. The strength of £ wildcat steeled his shrunken frame. A heavy walnut chair swung at the end of his arms. It crashed into Joe Titman's temple. He tried to grasp the table, lurched against it, crumpled and fell in a limp heap on the floor.

The old man stood over the body, his passion slowly ebbing away, his strength slipping into a clammy weakness. He knell down, put his hand over the heart, and could feel no movement. An icy, paralyzing terror began to creep over him. He had killed a man! They would come and find the body here. The sheriff and the coroner would come and they would take him away and lock him up in jail and try him and hang him, an old man who had lived decent and law-abiding all his life. Already he felt the noose about his neck, saw himself swinging from the rope.

The full horror of it seemed to last for centuries, but it had passed in a few seconds. The terrible, paralyzing clutch relaxed and already his thoughts were growing fluid with the nimble guile of the cornered creature that must act or die. Stealthy as a panther he padded across the room, bent almost double, and pulled the blind closer.

Then he slunk back and closed the kitchen door, which in his moment of amazement he had left open. As he did so he peered out into the cold, black night. There was neither light nor sound, only a great pall of blackness. The house had grown very cold and he shivered. The fire had gone out.

Summoning what remained of his ebbing strength, he dragged the dead man's body to the bottom of the narrow stairway that led up to the attic and placed it, face downward, in the position of one who has fallen down stairs. He worked feverishly, frantically. Thank God there was no blood. He scuttled up and fetched a pillow and stuffed it under Joe's head, turning the head sidewise.

Then he went into the best room and straightened the furniture, set the photograph where it belonged, the chair in its place against the wall. As he was bringing out the lighted lamp, he heard a dog howl, and the lamp almost fell to the floor. As if dogs didn't howl every night, he thought reassuringly, as he set the lamp shakily on the kitchen table. Then he closed and locked the door of the best room. In the kitchen he picked up the wood that he had spilled and threw it into the woodbox.

When everything was done, he went over it all again with minute care, unlocked the best room once more and made sure that everything was set in its place, that there was no drop of blood on the carpet. He blew at the dust on the center table so that it would re-distribute itself and cover finger marks. Once more he carefully closed and locked the door and hung the key on its nail.

In the narrow hallway below the stairs he looked critically at the form of the dead man, arranged an arm a little differently, looked again to make sure that there was no blood, then went out to the barn and hitched up to go and tell the nearest neighbor to fetch the doctor.

"Accidental death from falling down stairs while under the influence of liquor," was the verdict brought in next day at the inquest.

That night old Andy Van Anda had his house to himself.

The Adventure of Black, Peter
by Robert L. Fish [7]

A new Schlok Homesdunit by Robert L. Fish

Is there any aspect of criminal investigation in which the one and only Schlock Homes is not an expert? Perish the doubt! The Great Defective — pardon. The Great Detective — is a past master at deduction, induction, and reduction (especially ad absurdum), at construction, reconstruction (especially misconstruction), at appearance, disappearance (especially incoherence). If he ever retires to flea-keeping (or is it pea-reaping? tea-steeping?), his like will ne'er be seen again...

It is some years since the events I am about to speak of occurred, mainly owing to our housekeeper Mrs. Essex's use of one of my journals as a doorstop; but it is still with admiration, after all this time, that I am able to report of the uncanny ability of my good friend, Mr. Schlock Homes, in solving a problem that had baffled the best brains of Scotland Yard. Nor did the case come at a bad time, for Homes was at a loose end, having just resolved the singular affiar of the circus performer who swallowed electric-light bulbs for a living, a case my readers may recall as *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client,* and was more than ready for a new challenge.

It was a stormy Wednesday morning in early March, with sheets of icy rain beating our window panes, and the coal-fire in our quarters at 221-B Bagel Street a welcome buffer against the chill of the elements. Homes was curled up in his easy chair, violin in hand, toying with the slow movement of Copeland's Cymbal Concerto, while I was deep in research, studying a treatise on digital serum injections, *Vaccinations on a Thumb,* by Hayden, when there came a loud pounding on our street door, and a moment later our page was announcing a visitor. Homes and I exchanged curious glances, since neither of us was expecting company, but I dutifully dog-eared my page while Homes laid aside his violin and came to his feet.

To our great surprise, the man who appeared dripping in the doorway was none other than Inspector "Giant" Lestride, one of the original Bow Street runners, and certainly not one of Homes's closest admirers. Homes frowned, but in his hospitable manner, waved the

man to enter.

"Come in, Inspector. Have a chair. Let me have your things."

The large man removed his bowler and macintosh and accepted a chair by the fire, while Homes, after disposing of the garments, returned to his own chair. There were several moments of silence before Lestride cleared his throat and spoke.

"I may as well be blunt from the beginning, Mr. Homes," he said. "This visit was none of my doing. But the Assistant Commissioner insisted that we consult you on a rather interesting case that has come our way." He shrugged. "I seriously doubt you can be of any aid when the best brains of the Yard have been unsuccessful, but the A.C.'s word is law."

"And precisely what is this case you refer to?" Homes inquired evenly.

Lestride withdrew his notecase, opened it to extract a folded slip of paper, and handed it across to Homes. My friend accepted it and leaned back to study it, his face expressionless. I stepped behind him to read it over his shoulder. It had been typed on a standard telegraph form and read quite simply:

BARCLAYS WEDNESDAY MIDNIGHT SOUP YOUR RESPONSIBILITY QUICKLOCK TYPE VAULT

Homes fingered the note a moment and then looked up with a frown. "Where did you obtain this, Inspector?"

"We found it on the person of a man named Peter Black, but known to his intimates — for reasons we cannot fathom — as Peteman Black. He was picked up this morning on a routine charge of loitering with intent to gawk, and in the course of our regular search we discovered this telegram. Since our code experts could not make anything of it, we felt it highly suspicious. And, of course, unless a solution is discovered before eight o'clock this evening we shall be forced to release this man Black, since the maximum we can hold a person on his charge without additional evidence is twelve hours."

Homes nodded thoughtfully. "And this man Black, what does he do for a living?"

"Well," said Lestride, "he claims to work for Reuters, the news agency people, in some capacity that leaves him free evenings." He smiled a bit cruelly. "I can see you're stumped, Mr. Homes. Admit it."

"Since your people have had the message most of the morning, and I have just this moment been handed it, I think it only fair that you withhold your opinion until I have had time to study the matter," Homes said with a cool smile. "Still, even at first glance > certain things stand out."

Lestride frowned at him.

“Barclays,” Homes continued evenly, “—if that is the one referred to — is, of course, one of London’s leading restaurants, but I believe they normally close at ten, so bringing soup there at midnight seems a bit strange. As for the quicklock-type vault—”

He reached behind him for a reference book, opened it and studied a page for several moments, and then closed it, his finger marking the spot, while he looked at Lestride.

“Tell me,” he said, “am I correct in assuming this man Black is not a young man, but approximately my own age?”

“Why, yes, he is, Mr. Homes,” Lestride answered, obviously taken aback.

“And did he serve, as did we all, in the army during the Great War?”

Lestride’s jaw dropped. “As a matter of fact, he did,” he said, “although how you ever guessed it is beyond me!”

“It was not a guess, but a deduction,” Homes replied coolly, and came to his feet, closing the reference book and returning it to its proper place. He turned back to Lestride, who also had risen. “Well, Inspector, I suggest you return at six this evening. I should have some word for you on the matter at that time.”

Lestride studied Homes with suspicion for several moments, and then shrugged. “Well, you have been lucky on a few occasions,” he said. “If you can solve that code by this evening, I shall only be too glad to let bygones Le bygones.” And picking up his mac and bowler, he quickly made his way down the stairs.

“ ‘I shall only be too glad to let bygones be bygones!’ ” Homes quoted with a wry smile. “One would think I had not set him straight a dozen times in the past. Ah, well, I suppose I shall have to do it once more, for the Commissioner’s sake, and still be forced to face Lestride’s officiousness in the future.”

“But, Homes,” I cried. “How were you able to deduce the man’s age and army background from those few words?”

“Later, Watney,” he said in kindly fashion. “At the moment there is much to do.”

“And do you honestly feel you can solve a code that has stumped the experts at the Yard? I do not doubt your ability, Homes,” I added, “but time is so limited.”

“All the more reason not to waste it, then,” he said, and started to undo the cord of his dressing-gown. “And now I must go out, much as I dislike to do so in this weather.”

His final words were muffled as the door closed behind him. In mystified silence I awaited his reappearance, and when at last the door to his room opened, I fear my mouth fell open in astonishment, for Homes was dressed in the garb of a soldier. And since fully thirty

years had passed since he last had occasion to wear it, it was necessarily short in the shank.

The campaign hat with the acorns fitted well enough, however, and the rolled puttees — other than being a bit faded — were not too bad. With the years his swagger stick had warped a bit, but was still clearly usable. He walked to the doorway with an officer's strut that was characteristic of his great acting ability, swished his swagger stick against his leg, winced, and smiled painfully at me.

"I shall return," he said with a brave grimace that left me as puzzled as admiring, and limped down the steps.

Dusk had fallen and the cold rain continued to sweep the streets when Homes at last came back. He climbed the stairway in laboured fashion, flung the door shut behind him, and fell into a chair, immediately bending to loosen the tight puttees. I noted his scowling visage with concern.

"Homes!" I asked anxiously. "Are you all right?"

He did not answer but instead unwrapped the puttees and shook them violently. A torrent of water descended upon our rug followed by several cigarette stubs and various other pieces of debris. "From the bottom up, not from the top down!" he muttered to himself in exasperation, and fell back into his chair. Suddenly he seemed to recall my question.

"Why, yes, Watney," he replied with a smile. "Other than being chilled and quite hungry, I am fine. What has Mrs. Essex prepared for our evening repast?"

"Pickled curries with buttered chutneys, your favourites," I replied. "But, Homes, what of the problem? What of those unintelligible words? Were you able to make any headway?"

"Of course," he said languidly, and reached behind him for a Venusian. He lit it and drew smoke into his lungs deeply, with a twinkle in his eye. I could see he was merely drawing out the suspense in that insufferable manner of his when he had finally brought some difficult problem to a successful conclusion.

"Really, Homes!" I said with a touch of asperity. "At times you are quite impossible!"

"No, no, Watney!" he said, holding up his hand. "Impossible is what you eliminate when you wish to remain with the improbable." He sighed. "All right, then, Watney, if you cannot await Lestride's arrival, I suppose I must satisfy your curiosity. The message was clarity itself, given the proper approach, and was quite natural to be on the person of Mr. Black, since he works for a news agency. It merely states that a romantic colonial with a rather odd appellation — apparently he drinks — has been fortunate enough to win a

terpsichorean contest in one of our commonwealth nations. Canada, to be precise. It was just that simple."

"Really, Homes," I said reproachfully. "You gain nothing by pulling my leg!"

"Oh, I am quite serious, believe me!" he replied. "But here, if I am not mistaken, is Lestride himself, and you shall hear the details as I give them to him."

The door opened to reveal the large police-officer, his bowler held tightly in his hand. He made no motion to relieve himself of his dripping macintosh, but stood there like a rock, his normal superciliousness asserting itself as always.

"Well, Mr. Homes," he said with a sneer, and it was evident he was prepared to enjoy my friend's discomfiture, "I assume we shall be forced to allow Mr. Black his freedom simply because you were unable to break the code."

"Come in, Inspector," Homes said warmly. "Take off your coat and have a seat. You are quite correct in stating that you will have to free Mr. Black, not because I was unable to solve the riddle of those words, but precisely because they were so easily explained."

He smiled at the startled expression on the Inspector's face, waited until the still-suspicious police official had divested himself of his outer garments and was seated, and then withdrew the slip of paper from his pocket. He placed it on a table where we could all peruse it and laid a thin finger upon it.

"Let us consider these words," he said calmly. " 'BARCLAYS WEDNESDAY MIDNIGHT SOUP YOUR RESPONSIBILITY QUICKLOCK TYPE VAULT.' Now, Watney, you asked me this afternoon how I was able to deduce the man's age and army background from these few words. Well, you were in India at the time, I believe, and the Inspector, here, was too young to be involved; but in the extensive training we were put through to prepare us for the trenches of France, we were taught the quicklock-type vault as a means of leaping over enemy barbed wire. In fact, this type vault remained in Regs until it was pointed out that too many of our troops were suffering from hernias as a result of keeping the knees so tightly compressed during take-offs, after which the quicklock was replaced by the more sensible open-stance-type vault that I believe is in use to this day."

I stared in unashamed admiration at my friend, while even Inspector Lestride was forced to modify the frowning suspicion with which he had been attending Home's words. Homes leaned back, tenting his fingers, and continued calmly.

"Now," said he, "knowing this Peter — or Peteman — Black was familiar with the quicklock-type vault indicated to me he had been in the war; hence my deduction regarding his age and past army

experience." He untented his fingers long enough to raise one of them professionally. "However, it also indicated to me something far more important."

"And what is that, Homes?" I asked breathlessly.

He smiled at me. "Consider," he said. "Here we have a man who works for a wire service, an employment where information is often transmitted in code either for reasons of economy, or to prevent competitive services from stealing information. True, to us the information may not appear to be very significant, but undoubtedly it was to a born newsman."

"But what information?" Lestride asked, his attention now fully rivetted upon my friend, and his sneering manner no longer in evidence. "And what possible code?"

"As to the information," Homes replied, "as I explained to Watney before your arrival, Inspector, it merely dealt with the winning of a dancing contest. And as for the code, it was the natural one for an ex-army man to use. It was the standard military vocabulary — known, I believe, as the phonetic alphabet."

Lestride stared at him. "The *what?"*

"The phonetic alphabet," Homes repeated and turned to me. "Did they not use it in India, Watney?"

"Of course," I said instantly, and quoted from memory. "Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog, Echo, Fox, and so on for A, B, C, D—"

Homes held up his hand. "Ah! I also thought so, but when I applied those letters to this message, I got no results. It then occurred to me that over the years the phonetic alphabet might well have been changed. In the proper raiment, I had no difficulty in gaining access to the local Army and Navy Store, and there I fell into conversation with a clerk who had served as signalman with General Rohr at Belleau Wood, and he gladly furnished me with the present version. Instead of Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog, and so forth, the phonetic alphabet in use in the army to-day is now Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, and so forth."

Lestride shook his head. "I still fail to understand what that might possibly have to do with the message there on the table!"

"Let us consider that message, in view of what I have just revealed to you, Inspector," Homes said evenly. "BARCLAYS WEDNESDAY MIDNIGHT SOUP YOUR RESPONSIBILITY QUICKLOCK TYPE VAULT. The words in themselves have no meaning, but were used merely to transmit the message by the use of the initial letter of each word. Let us take them, and we see we have B, W, M, S, Y, R, Q, T, and V."

"So?" Lestride demanded, his old belligerence beginning to return.

“So let us see where these letters lead us when we apply them to the modern phonetic alphabet in use to-day, a copy of which I have here.” Homes laid a second sheet beside the first one and pointed out the code words for each of the letters. With wonder we saw the message, which Homes wrote for us in his fine copperplate:

BRAVO! “WHISKEY” MIKE SIERRA, YANKEE ROMEO, QUEBEC TANGO VICTOR!

“Homes!” I cried proudly. “You have done it again!”

“You mean—” Lestride faltered.

“Precisely,” Homes said a bit severely. “Mr. Black was simply carrying this message, received I have small doubt, from their Canadian correspondent. I do not claim the news is of world-shaking importance, but one thing is certain; delayed as it has been through the heavy-handed tactics of the police, it is undoubtedly no longer newsworthy, and Mr. Black has probably lost money because of it. You might consider this fact when you release him.”

“I shall apologise to him most thoroughly as soon as I return to the Yard,” Lestride said brokenly, and left our presence a more sober and, I hope, a more judicious man.

It was early morning and a strong wind during the night had cleared the heavy clouds, bringing us welcome relief from the poor weather that had plagued us. I was at the breakfast table shelling my first caper and attempting to peruse the morning journal at the same time, when Homes joined me. He looked pleased with himself, as well he might having just saved a poor innocent from further incarceration. He seated himself across from me and drew his napkin into his lap.

“And have you found anything in the news of interest to a rather bored investigator, Watney?” he asked, reaching for the kippers and the marmalade.

“Well, Homes, there is this,” I said, reading a front-page story. “It seems that last night one of the largest banks in London was burgled. The thieves managed to explode the safe and escape with several million pounds. Police have found some substance on the property which their chemists claim to be a combination of nitrate and glycerol.”

“Nitrate, of course,” Homes said thoughtfully, “is the reduced charge for telegrams after a certain hour, but glycerol?”

He eschewed his kipper for a few moments to go into his study and return with a reference volume from his vast library. He leafed through the pages, muttering to himself, and then suddenly stopped as he located the material he sought.

“Ah, here it is! Glycerol: ‘...used as a softener in pharmacy, as a

preservative of food, as a moistener of tobacco and other materials, as an adulterant for wine, beer, etcetera—' "

His eyes came up to meet mine, horrified.

"As an *adulterant* for wine or beer? These miscreants must be brought to the bar of justice post-haste, Watney! A telegram to the authorities offering my services, if you will!"

The Jury Box
by John Dickson Carr [8]

Detection keyed with liveliness, I am happy to report, looms very large this month. Three of the four are fair-play mysteries, one featuring a tough Bow Street Runner in pre-Victorian Britain, while our fourth item provides superior cops-and-robbers from today. There's something for everybody; your mentor has no gripe.

Beginning with a skyjacked plane whose bandit bails out with nearly half a million in ransom off the coast of the British Honduras, *The Inside Man,* by George Harmon Coxe (Knopf, $5.95), sweeps at a pace as unfaltering as its ingenuity and skill.

Private Investigator Jack Dunbar and Attorney Dave Barry, hired by East Coast Airlines to recover the ransom money, must fight foul tactics, from muggers to worse, as soon as they land at Belize, Honduras. A small plane, stolen locally by some unknown pilot to pick up the skyjacker at sea, is found wrecked and sunk, with the money missing but the skyjacker shot dead inside.

Assisted by Inspector McCain of the official police, our two investigators keep their balance amid picturesque characters from the sympathetic to the sinister, from attractive Mrs. Marion Morgan to enigmatic Pilot Delgado and his nightclub girl.

The principal clue, although fair and honorable, is so ingenious that you may miss it altogether. Of equal ingenuity is the hiding place for the missing money as in smooth, literate prose we race towards disclosure and finale. George Harmon Coxe, that reliable old master, has never written a better story.

It seems unfortunate that such first-class detection as *Appleby's Other Story,* by Michael Innes (Dodd, Mead, $4.95), should be downgraded in its publisher's subtitle as "a novel of suspense." Mr. Innes, another old master, belongs on a higher plane.

At Elvedon Court, his stately country house from which certain paintings have already been stolen, Maurice Tytherton is murdered just before a courtesy call paid by Sir John Appleby, now retired Commissioner of Metropolitan Police.

If more than one British element seems all too familiar — the crochety victim, the once-disowned son returning from abroad, the ill-assorted guests among whom almost every man seems emotionally involved with the wrong woman — our author adds new ingredients to a plot far trickier than at first it would appear.

Just how crooked is the shady art dealer? What clue can be provided by the statue below the window? Both atmosphere and

robust humor sustain us as academic-minded Sir John Appleby applies literary as well as factual deduction, and snares a crafty murderer into the flight of no-escape. Here is classic mystery classically and admirably solved.

Richard Falkirk's *Beau Blackstone* (Stein and Day, $6.95) finds our old friend Edmund Blackstone, hardest nail of the Bow Street Runners under Magistrate Sir Richard Birnie, once more enmeshed in trouble during the troubled eighteen-twenties. With all England's attention on steam locomotion, that new phenomenon, gangs of navvies have been toiling to complete the Stockton and Darlington Railway, a distance of fully twenty-five miles.

Not only has some highwayman (inspired by whom?) held up the stage-coach with the workers' pay, but there are rumors of a Great Train Robbery to be tried as soon as Stephenson's *Rocket* takes the road. Blackstone the redoubtable must frustrate all plots.

Disguising himself as a laborer, he soon collides both with Highwayman Challoner and with Petro, "king of the navvies," who has never lost a fight.

But Blackstone mustn't lose. Amid women as different as Josephine the missionary and Rookery Molly, Petro's mistress, or men varying from Frying Pan Charlie to dignified Sir Joshua, murder and riot stalk the line until the highwayman's last throw, the train's triumphant journey, and the masks-off moment when our hero traps the villain behind it all. Don't miss this one.

The roaring crooks' chronicle of *Zaleski's Percentage,* by Donald MacKenzie (Houghton Mifflin, $5.95), centers on a historic jewelled cross. Recovered from Nazi looters during the war by British-based Poles under Casimir Zaleski, it is now on display in London. Zaleski, aging and shabby, still feels dishonored because the British have never acknowledged his feat. If he resteals the cross for sale, his needy friends will be avenged.

Thus begins battle, with the Poles and Canadian Kirk Fraser caught between hostile forces before a blazing finish when honor is satisfied and all good men are happy.

Death at Devil's Hole
by Julia McNiven{©1974 by Julia McNiven.}

Department of "First Stories"

This is the 408th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine... a fine and unusual debut in print in which the author integrates background and plot with the skill of an old pro...

Mrs. Julia McNiven was born in England and spent her childhood "commuting" between England and the United States during World War II, "dodging torpedoes en route." She attended college in the fifties, and is now settled in Mamaroneck, New York, in a Charles Addams-type house, with husband, four children, cat, dog, and hundreds and hundreds of books, her "life bounded on all sides by mystery stories." Her husband reads them, one son makes them into movies, and her father writes them. Her main interests: writing, tennis, skiing, theology, and medieval history.

Oh, yes, her father writes mysteries. Julia McNiven is the oldest daughter of one of the Grand Masters, one of the most famous mystery writers of all time — John Dickson Carr...

A thin cold wind that had blown all day died suddenly, making the air almost warm by comparison. Turner pushed his goggles up onto his head and squinted at the dark clouds gathering at the summit of Devil's Mountain. The upper trails, covered with ice and virtually unskiable, glinted wickedly in the late afternoon light.

There will be fresh powder tonight, thought Turner with relief, feeling snow in the leaden stillness of the air. Ten inches, maybe a foot. The small knot of worry in the pit of his stomach relaxed momentarily as his mind flashed ahead to the night, to snow-cats crawling over the mountain like giant insects on a white blanket, packing down the powder, covering the ice which had plagued Devil's Mountain for the past month.

Tomorrow all the trails would be open again — all, that is, except Pitchfork. The knot of worry was back in his insides. They would not open Pitchfork — not this season. Never, if he had his way.

In front of him his afternoon ski class stood in its usual crooked

line, six pairs of boots shifting restlessly in their bindings. Hell's Irregulars, Turner thought grumpily, the Impossible Six. In spite of demonstration, cajolery, threats, and bribes these past five days, not one of them had made the transition from a snowplow turn into the faster, neater stem Christie, the beginning of intermediate skiing. For Turner, who prided himself on his teaching ability, this was a source of considerable irritation. Thank heaven it was Friday and he'd get rid of the lot of them in an hour or so.

An onlooker would have found Turner an attractive figure, slim and compact in his red and black ski clothes. His sun-bleached hair was short for the season, his eyes gray as the gray winter sky. Skiing was the deep abiding passion of his life, and he enjoyed sharing this love with others.

From November to April they came to him in all shapes and sizes, hoping to learn grace and agility in five easy lessons. Some of them learned it, too. But not this lot. The fault, he decided, was his own. The latest death on Pitchfork had left them all at Devil's Hole shaken and unsure.

"All right," Turner barked. "That's the sloppiest line on the mountain. Straighten up. Get closer together. Arthur, your buckles are undone again. Sigmund, those poles are five miles too long. Millie, never mind the lipstick, you don't need make-up on a mountain. From here on back to the base lodge I want nothing but good form, you hear me? Remember," he tried to sound enthusiastic, "I'll be watching to see who earns the Best-in-Class Award, and gets to come down Exhibition all by himself! Okay?"

Millie slipped the lipstick back in the pocket of her lime-green jump suit and smirked. Lord, Turner was a pill! As if there was any doubt who would get the award! She looked up and down the line. Arthur, her rabbit of a husband? Sal and Sue, the Bobbsey twins, forty pounds overweight each of them? Sigmund the slow? Or Jennifer, her own crummy daughter?

Millie let out a scream. Her mouth formed a girlish O in a face that was trying hard not to look 40.

"Jennifer! Jenn-i-fer! Turner, she's gone off on her own again, the little freak!"

Turner threw one startled glance at the end of the line where Jennifer had been standing a few minutes earlier.

Millie's voice became shrill.

"How could you let her get away from us? Why don't you keep an eye on her? Think of the time we're wasting, not to speak of the money."

"Stop shouting, Mother, I'm here. I'm right here."

Moving easily on her skis, Jennifer glided out of a clump of pine

trees. Her cheeks were flaming with cold, and something else. Embarrassment? She held both poles in one hand and was tucking something inside her loose old-fashioned parka.

"You rotten kid, holding us up again! Arthur, you're her father, why don't you speak to her? Why does it always have to be me? You let her get away with murder!"

The other skiers shifted uncomfortably.

Turner sidestepped up to the young girl and held out his hand. The lumpy face looked up at him, not defiantly, but with eyes as cold and lackluster as two pebbles.

Turner took hold of the white corner protruding from her parka and pulled out the inevitable bulky sketching pad, bent slightly by the shape of her body. There were five or six new drawings since yesterday, he noticed. The top one was a pen-and-ink sketch in bold dark strokes, the lines suggesting starkness and cold. In the background was Devil's Mountain, its peaks haloed in storm clouds. In the foreground were figures on skis.

Sketching without mittens, Jennifer's fingers must have been numb with cold, but she had caught them all. Millie, smug and contemptuous; Sal and Sue, plump nonentities; Arthur with his bindings undone, and hopelessness in the droop of his shoulders; Sigmund the slow, all beard and glasses. Finally there was Turner himself, worry, exasperation, and all.

How much time had she had to do it? Four minutes, maybe?

There were other pictures on the pad, some swift and impressionistic, some highly realistic, colored with magic marker or paint. All were equally good.

"Give it back, Turner." The girl's voice was flat and thin, like the blade of a knife.

"Look, Jennifer, these are fine, really fine. You are a very talented young lady. But—"

"Some people don't think so." Jennifer glanced at Millie.

"But," Turner went on, "you can draw any time you want to. Why hold up the class?"

"Because she's a rotten kid is why! Moping around all the time — doesn't talk, just draws and grunts! Doesn't ski."

Sigmund seemed to wake up fractionally from his usual trance.

"Say, uh, Turner, how about we, uh, get going, huh? Are we here to ski or to listen to Millie?"

There was a general murmur of agreement.

"You shut up, you hippie freak!"

"Okay, calm down, everybody!" Turner tried to make light of the whole thing. After all, with luck, he'd never have to see any of them again.

With a snake-quick movement,of a mittened hand Jennifer grabbed the sketching pad from Turner, shoved it under her parka, pulled the drawstring tight, and dared him to come and get it.

Turner held onto his temper, reminding himself for the hundredth time that he was here to make the paying customers happy. And besides, with miserable Millie for a mother, how could the kid be normal? So he said with false heartiness, “We’re wasting time. I’ll ski down to that pine tree and you follow me. Lean forward! Bend your ankles! Let’s see who’s going to win that award!”

Without waiting for a reply Turner took off rapidly, making a series of faultless linked turns. Momentarily he was thrilled all over again by the purity of the air and the snow, the beauty of the great mountain.

They followed him down the moderate slope, teetering and sliding, skis chattering on the ice, arms flapping, legs stiff. Hopeless! What had he done to deserve this?

“Millie, slow down! Bend your knees!”

It was too late. The lime-green figure came straight toward him, out of control, skiing, as always, on the thin edge of disaster. Turner braced himself for the impact, but at the last possible moment Millie veered off to one side, stopping in an uncontrolled skid and a spray of ice chips.

“How about that?” Millie was pleased with herself. “Guess we know who gets the award in this class!”

Over my dead body, thought Turner grimly.

But to do Millie some sort of justice, the rest of the class was definitely worse. The Bobbsey twins had fallen flat on their faces over the same small mogul. Arthur had hit ice and was in considerable difficulty. Sigmund was making no attempt to do anything but a lumbering snowplow.

And Jennifer? Could that be Jennifer?

For a moment Turner thought he had picked up a skier from another class. But there was no mistaking the bulky red parka. Jennifer, who had not listened to instruction all week, was coming down the mountain, angulating well in a series of nice tight traverses and stem turns. As she drew near Turner she stopped in a beautifully executed uphill christie.

“Hey, Jennifer! That was great!”

For a moment her plain face softened.

“Yeah. Well. I can do things when I want to. It’s just that I don’t really want to do anything but draw. You know? If Millie would send me to art school—”

“I’ll art school you! Just wait till we get down to the lodge!” Millie’s face was tight with anger.

Slowly the others straggled up until they were all standing on the same level patch of hard packed snow. A couple of trails branched off to the left, each marked with a wooden signboard. On one was painted a green triangle, the mark of an easy run. The other showed a blue circle, indicating a harder, steeper slope.

To the right a narrow path, slick with blue ice, twisted sharply downward. An ominous black square warned skiers that this was a slope for experts only. Somewhere nearby, B lift clanked upward, and there was laughter, but the sounds were muffled in the heavy air.

"Hey, Turner!" Millie shouted. "All week you've kept us on these crummy easy slopes. How about taking us down an expert trail to end up with, huh? What do you say?"

"No way, Millie. You'd kill yourself on this ice."

Millie frowned but made no further comment.

"Listen," said Turner, "whoever wins the award will come up B lift over there, then ski down Exhibition. It'll be icy, but the person I choose will be able to handle it. The rest of us will be in the lodge watching and cheering. Understand?"

"How do we, like, know which trail to take, Turner? Is it marked?" Sigmund, coming out of his trance again, sounded worried.

Cheer up, Sig, it won't be you, thought Turner.

"Sure, it's marked. In fact, there are only two trails directly from the top of B lift. One is Exhibition. Look for the signboard with the blue circle. You can't miss it."

"Is the other an expert slope?" Millie didn't give up easily.

"Yeah. But it's marked with a black square, and, anyway, it's closed off with a rope."

"Why don't we come down that one to show how good we are?"

"I wouldn't advise it, Millie. The closed-off slope is Pitchfork."

"So what?" shrugged Millie.

But she was impressed. They were all impressed. Although the resort had tried to keep the story as quiet as possible, the fatality had been in the papers. Three weeks ago a skier had broken his neck on Pitchfork. Everyone staying at Devil's Hole knew about it.

What they did not know, as Turner did, was the exact number of accidents that had taken place on Pitchfork over the years, or that last season an instructor, coming down the slope too fast in bad light, had slammed into a tree at 60 miles an hour. He had been Turner's best friend. It had been a closed-coffin funeral.

"What's Pitchfork like?" asked one of the Bobbsey twins.

"Steep," said Turner, seeing in his mind the long approach, the incredible drop, the perpendicular chute, the twin forks at the end of the drop. If you missed the turn onto one of the forks, forget it. "You can see Pitchfork from the base lodge, Sal. It's dangerous. Spooky." He

shivered, not entirely from the cold. “Come on, let’s go down. Some hot wine will taste good.”

Through the pearly light of late afternoon, of flattened shadows and growing chill, they skied the easier slopes of Devil’s Mountain, taking trails called Little Imp, Old Scratch, and Homerun. They passed under B lift with its cargo of laughing skiers, strung out on suspended cable, like beads on a string.

Below them the roof of the lodge made an oblong patch of scarlet against the snow. In a few minutes Turner and his straggling band were threading their way through the spiky racks of skis toward the doors of the lodge. Above the entrance two wooden imps leaned out, gargoyle fashion, supporting a sign between them.

Welcome, the sign said, *to Hell.*

Clang, went the electric guitar, clang, clang!

On a small stage the Hell’s Belles were gyrating to amplified music. Smoke, laughter, and the indefinable ambience of après ski filled the timbered lodge with blue haze and loud noise.

It was 4:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. The ski week was over. Pins had been given out all around. The lifts had closed, except for B lift which was still running for the use of the award winners from each class. Most of them had already come down Exhibition. Their form had ranged from excellent to terrible.

It had started to snow, but inside the lodge hot spiced wine spread a pleasant warmth through the crowd. Turner sat jammed in on a wooden bench with the members of his two classes. The winner of his morning class had just made a creditable run, and was now back at the table laughing and accepting congratulations.

“So,” said Turner, standing up and shouting to make himself heard over the music. “The announcement you’ve all been waiting for! The winner in my afternoon class is—” He paused dramatically and glanced around the table. The Bobbsey twins were watching him in mute adoration. Sigmund, unmoved, was lost in the music. Jennifer was sketching on her lap. Arthur looked tired. Millie smirked.

“Jennifer! Get your skis on, girl, you’re it! Best skier in the class!”

The drawing pencil paused in mid-air.

“Me, Turner? You mean it?”

The plain face was suddenly pretty.

“You bet I mean it! Now get up on that mountain and show them how you do it!” Turner did not look at Millie.

Still clutching her sketching pad, Jennifer headed for the door, pulling on her parka as she went.

Clang, went the guitar, clang, clang!

Out of the comer of his eye Turner saw Millie get up from the

table. The music drowned out much of what she called him, which was just as well, since she commented in detail on his ancestors, his present habits, his probable future.

"Choosing that rotten kid instead of me! You fake! Well, I'll just show you, Mr. Wonderful Turner, I'll show you all! Want to see some real skiing? Just watch me! You just watch!"

And she was off, a lime-green fury, shoving and pushing her way toward the door.

Turner's head began to ache.

Should he go after her? What was she going to do? Come down Exhibition, most likely, trying to steal Jennifer's thunder. But that still wouldn't win her the award. Forget it.

Turner moved through the laughing, jostling crush of bodies to the large windows with their excellent view of the south face of Devil's Mountain. Lazy flakes of snow were drifting down, and this alone should have made him feel better, should have loosened the knot in the pit of his stomach.

What was worrying him now? Jennifer?

Through the windows the mountain was open to view, like a map. He studied the trails, empty except for Exhibition where a lone skier had just taken a fall over the finish line. Any minute now Jennifer would be coming down.

Sigmund, Arthur, and the Bobbsey twins had joined him, and were peering upward. To the right, in sharp contrast to the broad easy Exhibition slope, a narrow death-trap of a trail plunged almost vertically downward, before forking out wickedly into two headwalls of ice. Pitchfork.

It should have been closed years ago, thought Turner. But it has its own legend, its own mystique.

"I skied Pitchfork," was something to brag about among veteran skiers.

"Come on, Jennifer! Get it over with!"

Then he saw her. She had chosen a faster line than she should have for her ability, but, Turner noted with satisfaction, she was skiing easily, in good control.

He was so intent on the girl that it took a gasp from the crowd to alert him to trouble. His eyes moved to the right, and, incredulous, he took in the whole picture, not believing what he saw.

On the left, Jennifer, a small red stick-figure, skied gracefully down Exhibition. On the right, as if on a split television screen, someone in lime-green was coming too fast down the narrow approach to Pitchfork, skiing out of control, on the thin edge of disaster.

Millie!

She was over the drop in a flash, and, miraculously, managed to stay on her feet for a moment longer. Then she was falling, falling down a chute of ice, a wild eggbeater of a fall, arms and legs in a tangled mess. One ski released and flew off into the air. Another snapped like a matchstick. The small figure, gone limp as a stuffed toy, fell faster, gaining momentum.

From those watching at the window there were shouts and screams. All over the lodge the noise died suddenly as people pressed forward to see. It seemed to go on for a long time, the limp green body catapulting toward the fork in the trail. Then it was over. The body did not make the turn.

On Exhibition, Jennifer skied serenely down the mountain.

It was Sigmund who finally broke the stunned silence.

"She said she'd show us, uh, how to ski."

Millie, rushed to a nearby hospital, was pronounced dead on arrival.

The managers of Devil's Hole made immediate plans to reshape and gentle the mountain. The name Pitchfork was taken off the ski maps. The slope was bulldozed off of the mountain. The resort lost very little business in spite of the publicity. Snow conditions for the rest of the season were excellent.

Turner continued to teach morning and afternoon classes, but his heart had gone out of it. He had been among the first persons to reach Millie after the accident, and one of the last ever to ski Pitchfork. He had ridden with Arthur in the ambulance and was at the hospital when the doctors shook their heads.

The next day he had talked to Jennifer.

She was sitting on her packed suitcase, doodling with a pencil.

"I shall have to tell somebody, you know, Jennifer. Somebody in authority."

The two dull pebbles stared hard at him.

"About Millie," he said.

"What about her?"

"I saw those drawings that day on the mountain. Remember? Clever pictures. Realistic pictures. Pictures of wooden signs, one with a blue circle on it, one with a black square. Did you plan it all ahead of time?"

"Plan it? No! How could I?"

Then her plain face crumpled.

"You see, Turner... I was so proud when you said I won the award. So proud. But then Millie had to go and spoil it all, as usual. She came out of the lodge yelling at me to stay off the mountain, that she was going up instead.

“By then I had my skis on and was heading for the lift, so I pretended not to hear. All the way up I hoped she wouldn’t follow, but she did. You know something, Turner? She hated me ever since I was a little girl. I don’t know why.”

The pencil moved meaninglessly over the pad, making swift blind strokes.

“When I was almost at the top I saw her get on the lift, and something happened to me. I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to hurt her bad.

“I knew just what to do. It sort of came to me. I had tape in my pocket, and my sketching pad in my parka. You know?”

Vividly Turner remembered her hurrying out of the lodge, the pad still in her hand.

“I tore off the sign pictures, taped the blue one over the black signboard, and the black one over the blue. Then I un? hooked the rope and hid it behind a tree. There was plenty of time. I stood where she couldn’t see me, and waited. She came rushing off the lift, took one look at the blue sign, and skied off down Pitchfork.

“I put back the rope and tore off the pictures. It only took a few seconds. Then I skied fast down Exhibition.

“Funny. I didn’t think you’d remember those pictures. But anyway, I burned them, so you can’t prove anything. Besides, who would believe you? Did you know daddy is going to send me to art school?”

The knot in Turner’s stomach had become a sharp pain.

“What if someone does believe me? What then?”

Still doodling, the girl shrugged.

“Reform school, I guess.” The pebbles regarded him steadily. “I hear they have great rehabilitation programs now. I’m sure they’d offer art.”

Reflected Glory
by Kay Nolte Smith [9]

Department of "First Stories"

Here are the 409th and 410th "first stories" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine... The two stories were submitted together, and we thought both worthy of publication. So once again we give you a double debut, back to back, in the same issue. And this time, while the stories are completely different, they have a common thread: both are academic in flavor and locale.

The author, Kay Nolte Smith, has a "divided career": she is an actress (her professional name in the theater is Kay Gillian) and she is a writer. Until now she has had only nonfiction published — articles chiefly in the field of esthetics. She has been "an avid fan of mystery fiction for years, because it is the one category of literature in which two crucial elements — plot and ingenuity — are still considered crucial"...

❖

There was no need to wait another minute. His afternoon class had seemed to take place in slow motion, and then the drive home from the college had been prolonged by a wait at the liquor store; but all that was behind him now, while in front of him was a tall drink and a weekend in which to savor the magazine.

He opened the magazine, thinking that millions of copies were spreading across the country — that hundreds would reach the college alone — and found the article. He stared incredulously at a color photograph of himself that filled an entire page. The picture had been taken on the patio, seated just as he was now, and shot from such an angle that his figure, short and plump in actuality, seemed to dominate the house and the grounds. It was only when his breath returned that he realized how great was his relief. A smile inflated his pink round cheeks and his eyes, imprisoned in cages of tiny lines, shone for a moment like blue beads.

He looked, finally, at the page that faced his photograph and read the title: "A Visit with Jasper Kryler's Son." He read the subtitle: "As youth discovers the literary lion of the '30s, his son reminisces." Everything drained from his smile, leaving only the shape. He took a long drink and began warily to scan the text.

The first paragraph described him as a Professor of Creative Writing at Bentham College, appointed on the publication of his memoir about his famous father. He was relieved that neither his own age nor that of the memoir was given; it had appeared twelve years before, when he was still in his thirties, and was his only published book. He never could think of it without remembering his father's agent, who had edited the memoir, insisting on a virtual rewrite; his mouth tightened, but he reminded himself that the agent was now dead, and he smiled.

He turned back to the text, to a description of the town of Bentham and of "the handsome house in the New England hills where Jasper Kryler lived until his death." There was a discussion of the new generation of college students who formed "the Kryler cult," but there was no mention of his own classes so he hurried on, skimming through the story of his father's career: the early struggle and the escapades in Paris, the war years, the writing of the trilogy, the Nobel Prize, and the fatal solo flight across the mountains. Exit the Old Man, he thought impatiently, turning the page. But the article had ended. He had been quoted less than a dozen times, and always on the subject of his father's life. The quotation marks trailed through the text like ants.

He had known, of course, that he was being interviewed because he was Jasper Kryler, Jr. But still, he thought, the familiar phrase locking into place in his mind, serving as a bar to its own completion. He recalled the interview: the excellent lunch he had provided, the description he had given of his classes, and the book reviews he had written. Why had none of that been mentioned?

The answer sidled into his awareness. He drained his drink and flung his glass across the patio. It landed with a thud, intact, reminding him that when the Old Man had thrown glasses around, they had shattered with a splendid ring.

The front doorbell rang loudly. Although he was not expecting anyone, he decided that one of his colleagues must have seen the magazine. He thought of the amused tolerance with which those colleagues treated him; he had counted on the article to conjure respect from their faces, but now he felt paralyzed, unable to answer the door. He forced his legs to move, reminding himself that the article was a glowing tribute to the name of Kryler.

A young man stood on the steps, clutching a package. He wasn't one of the Bentham students, although he was dressed like many of them. A ragged poncho hung on his tall bony frame and his feet were bare. His face seemed bare, too, an expressionless canvas framed by long black hair.

"Yes?" said Jasper guardedly.

"I've got to talk to you. You're the only man I can talk to."

"Oh? About what?"

"Literature."

Jasper hesitated. "Come in."

Seated in the living room, the young man stared at its Art Deco furnishings in silence. "Now then," Jasper smiled, "why am I the only man to talk to?"

"Because you're his son. You sure don't look it, though."

Jasper shifted in his chair but the young man went on, his pale eyes transfixed by space. "I read his stuff two years ago and it changed everything for me. Before that I didn't know who I was. He made me want to write. So I did. This book." He held out the package he had been clutching. "You've got to read it."

"If you want literary criticism, enroll in one of my classes."

The young man rose and came closer. "You've got to read it. It's like one of his. That's why I brought it to you. I couldn't tell anybody else about it, they'd laugh. I saved it for you."

"Who are you? Did someone send you?"

The young man shook his head, puzzled. "Nobody even knows I was writing it. If people asked me what I was doing. I'd move on to some other place."

"What place? Where are you from?"

"Oh, all over," said the young man vaguely. "L.A., Chicago, New Mexico, New York for a while. Sometimes you find a group, but it's better alone. You take a job, maybe, and then you move on. All you want to do is write. Like him."

"And what makes you think I would care?"

"Well, aren't you his son?"

Jasper rose, a hard red circle blooming on each of his cheeks. "I think you had better leave. Now."

"Sure," said the young man amiably. "I'll stay away till you've read it." He put down the package carefully. "I'll be back soon." He walked serenely to the hall, and then the front door clicked behind him.

"Of all the bloody nerve!" Jasper muttered. "Walking in as if he owned the place." Slivers of admiration sneaked into his anger and fed it. He thought of throwing-out the package, and then he thought of something more satisfying: the look that would twist the young man's face when he heard that his book was bad.

Smiling, Jasper carried the package into the study, switched on the reading light, and took out his gold-rimmed glasses. He unwrapped the manuscript, which was not typed but neatly hand-printed. The title page read: *Pursuit of the Hunter* by Luke Blount.

When he reached the end of Chapter One, his smile had faded;

when he finally turned the last page his mouth had become a taut seam. Despite his efforts to prevent it, the thought formed in his mind: the boy had written a Kryler book. The sentences were short and punchy; the hero was tough and sardonic; the story was filled with action and ended in defeat. If it weren't contemporary, Jasper thought, it could have been written by the Old Man.

He turned back to the title page: "by Luke Blount." By a nobody, he told himself, but he knew that the critics could turn Blount into a somebody; they could hail him as a hero who had reconciled the literary past and future. Jasper closed his eyes. Headlines swam into his mind: "Kryler Redivivus"... "Kryler's New Heir"... Luke Blount appeared, and then the Old Man; their figures merged into one huge image. He willed it to topple.

He opened his eyes hastily. The room was quiet, unchanged, reassuring. A smile curled in one corner of his mouth. He had been assuming, he realized, that *Pursuit of the Hunter* would be published — but wasn't he the one to say whether that would happen? He began to compose the phrases with which he would send Luke Blount away.

But the phrases died before his memory of the young man's confidence, and the resentment which it evoked. Then everything died in the presence of a new fear: Blount, Jasper realized, could take the manuscript to someone else, who might help him find a publisher. And word could get out that Kryler's own son had discouraged the author.

He drummed his fingers on the manuscript. To be or not to be? he thought, finding it unjust that he was confronted by such a choice. There would be no choice to make, he thought bitterly, if he had written the book himself. If *Pursuit of the Hunter* were by Jasper Kryler, Jr...

He sat up slowly, visualizing the reviews: "Kryler Is Dead, Long Live Kryler!" — and surrendering completely to the fantasy, to the feeling of standing at some high podium with ant hills of crowds below him.

He looked down. There was Blount's manuscript in his lap.

It was some moments before he realized that he was thinking of murder, and he waited for the shock that he ought to feel. The shock was that he didn't feel it. "That's because I don't mean it," he said aloud, quickly, but he got up and began to pace.

Of course, he thought, if Blount really was a loner, a drifter, there would be no one to inquire after him or to care if he was missing...

He paused at his desk and began to doodle on a pad. The scribbles reflected his thoughts, he decided; they were idle and abstract. Impractical.

He sighed and moved to the windows, pulling aside the drapes. It

was dawn. Unwilling to leave the room and take up the normal business of a Saturday morning, he stared restlessly at the lawns and gardens. Then his gaze was caught by a strange object near the potting shed. At first he thought it was a log, then he saw that it was someone sleeping — Luke Blount. He began to pace the room again, more slowly.

Two hours later he walked, out and shook the sleeper. “Wake up and come in, Luke,” he said. “Have breakfast and tell me more about yourself.”

Two years later *Pursuit of the Hunter* by Jasper Kryler, Jr. was published.

Several months after Luke’s visit Jasper had taken out the manuscript, made a few minor changes, and then begun slowly to type it, putting out word at the college that he was writing a novel. He had decided against taking it to a literary agent, and had approached a new aggressive publishing firm that responded eagerly to the Kryler name, promising him an intensive promotion.

Eventually a clipping bureau had begun to send him sentences and paragraphs about Jasper Kryler, Jr. and the book that would be published in the spring. He had appeared on several television talk shows, and had been invited to a party at which his fellow guests were important citizens of the literary world. It had seemed to him that each of these events was the turning of more and more eyes toward himself; he began to feel that he moved in a spotlight composed of people’s glances.

In the Sunday book section of the country’s leading newspaper, *Pursuit of the Hunter* was reviewed by a famous novelist. The review was entitled “Dry Sawdust Off the Old Block.”

An influential literary magazine dismissed the book as “a puerile pastiche of Kryler, Sr.’s works.” A Los Angeles review declared: “It Doesn’t Run in the Family.”

Jasper saw advance copies of some of the reviews at his publisher’s. It took him some time to read them, for the words kept jumping in rhythm with his pulse. When he had finished, he turned and denounced the publisher for promoting the book so widely and exploiting the Kryler name.

That night, alone in his study, he reread *Pursuit of the Hunter* and discovered that he had no opinion of it. He strained to recapture his former view; he even tried to feel that the critics were right, but his mind was like a heavy ball of dough.

The ball began to swell with the pressure of a thought: he had believed the book was good, good enough to bear his name. He had called himself a literary critic; what was he to call himself now?

He shoved the question back down into silence, by means of hurling the book across the room. He stared at it and whispered, “But I didn’t do it.”

When the first of the reviews appeared in print, he stayed away from the college for two days, phoning in to say that he was ill. But the secretary’s voice held a note of amusement and he decided it would look better if he went in. Several of his colleagues made dry remarks and his students gleefully asked him pointed questions about *Pursuit of the Hunter*. By the end of the week even the most casual glance seemed to him a beacon of contempt. “But I didn’t do it,” he muttered as he walked away from people.

The clipping bureau sent him copies of new reviews, several of which were favorable. *Pursuit of the Hunter* was equated with the best of Kryler, Sr.’s work by a weekly Vermont newspaper, and a sportsmen’s journal recommended the book as good reading on a camping trip.

Jasper was certain that his colleagues had planted the reviews to humiliate him, and he refused to leave the house again.

He drank steadily, but the liquor seemed to settle in his stomach, bypassing his mind. He sat for hours before the television set, waiting for a torpor that it did not induce. One night he was watching a talk show on which he had appeared a month before. The host and a guest were discussing the upcoming Father’s Day. “And then,” said the host, “there are kids who want to grow up and be *exactly* like dad. I think it’s called the Kryler complex.” The studio audience chuckled.

“But I didn’t do it!” Jasper cried.

Into his mind, like a cooling salve, crept the memory of the thing he *had* done.

Bentham’s Chief of Police was getting ready to leave the station after a long day when the desk sergeant came into his office.

“Sorry to hold you up,” said the sergeant, “but there’s a guy out here who says he’s got to talk to the man in charge. He’s from the college, name of Kryler, and he’s acting strange.”

“Kryler?” said the Chief. “I used to know his family a bit. Read most of his dad’s books.”

“Shall I bring him in?” asked the sergeant. Chief Corey nodded.

A short pudgy man was then ushered into his office. “I want to prove I didn’t do it,” he said, sinking into a chair.

Half an hour later Chief Corey was frowning deeply over a story he had extracted with some difficulty. “Now let’s see if I’ve got this straight. You claim that two years ago you killed a fellow named Luke Blount. You don’t know where he came from, because he had no family and just drifted around the country. You don’t know where his

body is, because after you poisoned him with weed killer you put him in the potting shed and set fire to it, and the next day you broke up what remained of the body and scattered it in the weekly garbage, which was hauled away. Then you got some people to clean up after the fire and had a new potting shed built on the same spot."

"Yes," said the little man.

The Chief frowned even more deeply and consulted his notes once more. "Then what is it you want to prove that you *didn't* do?"

"I didn't write the book. *Pursuit of the Hunter* — I didn't write it! Luke Blount did, and he brought it to me, but I killed him and stole it!"

Chief Corey's eyebrows shot up. "You mean your book that just came out? You claim somebody else wrote it?"

The visitor nodded.

The Chief's lips began to quiver, and he bit them. "Professor," he said finally, "my oldest boy tells me that people don't like your book, and I bet that's rough on you. I bet you wish you hadn't written it. But you can't come in here with a story like that and expect me to take it seriously. Confessing to theft and murder just so people won't think you wrote a bad book?"

"But I didn't!" The little man rose and looked off into space, as if he were addressing a crowd. "People have to realize. I didn't write the book at all. I did something much more difficult. I planned and executed a murder." His eyes darted back to the Chief. "So you've got to prove it."

"Now how am I going to do that?" Chief Corey stifled a laugh. "The next time you kill somebody, better leave some evidence lying around. Especially the body."

"You can make inquiries, can't you? Luke Blount, he's got to be missing from somewhere!"

"Sure," grinned the Chief. "But where?" Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "I thought that name sounded kind of familiar. You made that up out of your dad's books! I remember he had a fellow called Luke Horn, I liked him a lot, and then there was a somebody Blount, Harold or Harley, I think." He looked up at his visitor chidingly. "Now, Professor, couldn't you make up something more original than that?"

The little man's eyes closed, as if an inner weight had pulled them shut.

"I'll tell you what," said the Chief genially, patting him on the shoulder. "We'll just say that you committed the perfect crime. Okay?"

When the desk sergeant had shown him out, the little man stood for some time on the steps. Then he moved uncertainly up the street. He thought he saw one of his colleages approaching and turned aside hastily, pretending to check his reflection in a store window. But dusk

had fallen, the light was gone, and there was no reflection to be seen.

Theory of the Crime
by Kay Nolte Smith [10]

On the long trip back from the trial, Norman Lewis drove slowly, squinting into a curtain of November rain. The road seemed to be a tightrope on which his balance was constantly threatened by the headlights of approaching cars; they loomed up blindingly and unexpectedly, like yesterday's events in the courtroom.

When the verdict was brought in, he had stumbled from his seat in the rear, unable to start for home. He had lain in the hotel room all night, staring at a ceiling on which his memory painted two images; Brewster Pollock standing trial for murder — and Brewster Pollock writing *Conditions of Serenity,* giving to the world a great achievement in behaviorist psychology. The images had stayed with Norman; they were taunting him now, on the windshield of his car.

A shiver went through his thin small frame, reminding him of his body's betrayal: it was no longer the cool detached flesh of a scientist, but a thing crawling with tensions. He told himself that he would drive it all out, this activity inside the skin, as soon as he regained his own environment.

Peering out at the road, he saw that finally he was approaching the neighborhood of Adirondack University. It did not occur to him to go to his apartment; the car, like an animal in sight of home, gathered speed and went to the Psychology Building. When he unlocked the front door, the tower bells were sending three deep tones into the soggy night.

He slumped against the inside of the door, breathing deeply of the sharp chalky scents. A hint of color returned to his cheeks, and in the pale inverted triangle of his face the gray eyes no longer squinted but were open to the dark. He thought of the first time he had known the peace of these halls, more than 20 years before. He had been a young man without friends or future, his eyes hooded against the threat of human contact but his mouth a soft cry for help. He had walked into Brewster Pollock's classroom and discovered the armor of science, of the laboratory, and gradually, as if it were being smothered beneath a shield, his fear had seemed to die away.

He straightened and began to walk down the hall that had echoed his passage through the years, from undergraduate to lab assistant to research fellow. At the end of the hall was the reward of those years — his office, next to that of the Chairman, given to him when Dr. Pollock had made him his personal assistant.

He switched on the lights in his office. After his five-day absence

to attend the trial the objects sprang into his vision eagerly — the trim rows of books and the orderly ranks of cabinets that housed the records of a decade of experiments. He permitted himself to stand for a moment, basking in the room's familiarity, then he hung up his coat and took out the newspaper he had bought on the road. He went to his desk and began to reread the story of yesterday's events in court — the incredible, unexpected testimony of the neurosurgeon from Chicago, the final statement by both attorneys, and the verdict.

Tension coiled through his body again and he flushed with shame. He told himself that the sensations would disappear, because he was going to make a scientific review of all the events that had led to yesterday, and to decide whether he could face a future without Dr. Pollock.

He began by reminding himself that no one could understand as he did. Others could see only the superficial facts of the crime. Dr. Ernest Vine had been found in his summer cottage with part of his brain blown away and his own gun lying close to his hand, wiped clean of all prints but his own. The physical evidence had made suicide a possibility, but neither a note nor a motive could be found. Instead, the police found a neighbor who had seen an out-of-state car and recalled part of its license; they also found a young couple who had been on the beach that night, and who had overheard the victim quarreling with someone around the time of death.

It had not taken the police long to discover that the car and the quarreling voice, and the fingerprints on the cottage desk and mantel, all belonged to Brewster Pollock.

Norman's head dropped into his hands. The arrest, he thought — like everything else-had hinged on Dr. Pollock's relationship with Ernest Vine. Their feud was so long-standing and bitter, and so well known in the profession, that the police had had no trouble in learning its full history. He himself had been questioned; he had geared his answers to the officers' limited perspective.

He closed his eyes and found himself picturing Ernest Vine with part of his brain blown away. That brain, he thought, had been such an undesirable organ. It has persisted in ascribing to human behavior the dreary and erroneous catalogue of Freudian interpretations. It had derided Brewster Pollock at every step of his way, since their common days in graduate school. It had attacked *Conditions of Serenity* and denounced the book's great plan for the world of the future. The world of today, Norman thought, was much better off without the negative exemplar of Ernest Vine's brain.

He eased back in his chair, imagining that all such exemplars had been removed. Without the Freudians, he thought, there would be no talk of the "unconscious" and the "Id," or of hereditary forces. There

would be no mystical belief in the primacy and power of emotions. That view would become as archaic as the Nineteenth Century notion that men possessed something called "volition" and could choose their own actions.

He smiled. Without the Freudians, behaviorism would have, no real opposition. Psychology would become fully and finally scientific. Behavior would be regarded universally as a series of sensorimotor responses, conditioned by the environment. People would accept the fact of environmental conditioning; they would beg for a new world to be fashioned by Dr. Pollock.

The smile jerked from Norman's face. Rain struck the window behind him like the rolling of tiny drums. What should I do? he thought. The answer came automatically: ask Dr. Pollock, and he groaned. I cannot function here, he cried to himself. Trembling, he rose and left the office, and found himself climbing to a room on the third floor.

Several high thin cries greeted him, and a soft white shape scuttled to the front of one of the cages. "Hello there," he whispered, leaning on the cage for support.

Here in this room, he thought, were all of the conditions of serenity. A rat wanted only its pellet of food; it was not pushed into a spurious battle for wealth and fame. Men had named their "competitive jungle" after the animal kingdom, but in fact that jungle was the province of *home sapiens*. It was only men, their behavior reinforced by competitive exemplars, who clawed their way to success and waged every kind of battle, including war, because they were conditioned to the notion of outdoing one another. It was an environment, he thought heavily, that condemned murder yet reinforced man's tendency to commit the act.

He closed his eyes, and when he finally opened them it seemed to him, in the dim light, that the rows of cages were the communes of the future and the scuttling white shapes inside of them were men. He looked down the vista, seeing a world from which all negative exemplars had been eliminated, a world of peace and blessed predictability, of behavior that was engineered to be always selfless and serene.

When the tower bells rang six times, like a distant summons, he moved to the door and went down the flights of stairs, his steps growing faster and more firm.

Back in his office he stared for a long time at the printed words that were framed and hung beside his desk. "Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior." Watson's words, he thought, were still the manifesto of

behaviorism, even after 60 years, still the great cry of its battle. “The time seems to have come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness; when it need no longer delude itself into thinking that it is making mental states the object of observation.”

Gradually he became aware that within him there were no more tremors. There was only the dead repressive calm that now permitted him to function.

He took paper from a drawer and began to write, the words flowing easily. When he had reread all the pages, he nodded with heavy finality. Slowly he wrote one more page, quite different from the others. Then he put all the pages into his brief case.

He checked his watch, saw that it was only eight o’clock, and began to look at the pile of mail and memos that had accumulated while he was away. There were a number of supply requisitions; mechanically he signed one of them. The pen froze in his hand. He saw that he had signed as he always did, using Dr. Pollock’s signature. He tore the requisition into tiny pieces and dropped them into the wastebasket.

The newspaper lay there, glaring up at him, announcing the fact of Dr. Pollock’s acquittal.

He reached for the telephone.

Brewster Pollock drove toward the University.

Damn them, he was thinking, addressing himself to the rain, to his colleagues, and to his ex-wife who had not yet called to congratulate him, and to the press, which, instead of trumpeting his innocence, had described the verdict as one of “reasonable doubt.”

He swung the car into the parking lot and leaped out. He was a tall man, graying and emaciated, whose bones seemed to jut out in angry protest against the confinement of his skin. By contrast his eyes were sunken and quiescent.

He stode down the empty halls of the Psychology Building and flung open the door to his office. “Well,” he demanded, “what’s so urgent that you call me over here on Sunday morning?”

“Welcome home,” said Norman quietly.

Brewster Pollock grunted. “What the hell is the big emergency?”

“The trial, the verdict. I must talk to you about them.”

“For God’s sake! You couldn’t wait till tomorrow?” Then Pollock remembered his empty apartment; he shrugged and tossed his raincoat into a chair. “As long as you’ve dragged me over here, make me some coffee.”

He watched Norman hang up the coat and open the door of the enclosed bar and kitchenette. Norman’s eyes, he thought, were glassy this morning, like two spots of polish on an old shoe. The notion amused him for a moment; then he remembered that he had last seen

Norman in court. “So you heard it all,” he snapped. “Do you realize what Ernest Vine tried to do to me? He committed suicide and tried to frame me for murder!”

“Yes,” said Norman, putting water on to boil. “I heard your lawyer’s reconstruction of the crime.”

“That idiot! He thought I was guilty, right up to the moment when the neurosurgeon appeared.” Jangling the keys in his pocket, Pollock began to circle the desk. “Do you realize that Vine almost succeeded? The man was dying of a brain tumor, so he shoots himself in the head, just in the right place, in hopes there’ll be no sign of the tumor left. And there isn’t! Did you hear the coroner?” He mimicked a slow New England voice: “ ‘A man in perfect health, no medical reason for suicide.’ Idiot!”

Pollock flung his keys into a comer; they struck the walnut panel and thudded on the carpet. “All that history the prosecution dragged into court, all those witnesses who swore that Vine and I hated each other — well, those were swords with double edges. Maybe Pollock hated Vine, but it was vice versa, too. Enough to make him try to frame me for murder!”

Automatically Norman picked up the keys and put them on the desk. “But isn’t that just a theory? A possible explanation of what might have happened?”

“Don’t be imbecilic. Why else would Vine kill himself right after I’d been there? He couldn’t stand the thought of dying and letting Brewster Pollock have the last word.”

“Excuse me,” said Norman. “The water is boiling.” He prepared two cups of coffee and brought them to the desk, relieved that his hands were the steady instruments of science. When Pollock angled his body into the desk chair, Norman sat across from him. He cleared his throat. “Was it hard to find a neurosurgeon?”

Pollock shrugged. “The man appeared from nowhere two days ago. Vine had gone out to see him under another name, so the fool didn’t start connecting his patient with Vine until he read about the trial and saw Vine’s picture in the Chicago papers.”

“Perhaps I did not make my question clear. Was it hard to find a neurosurgeon who would perjure himself?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Norman leaned forward. “I know that you killed Ernest Vine.”

Pollock’s cup came down so sharply that drops of coffee beaded the desk.

“I thought the jury would find you guilty. I was certain of it. Then you produced the neurosurgeon and the brain-tumor story. I was — I was stunned. Of course, the jury was not in a position to understand the crime as I do.”

Norman took his brief case from the floor beside him and brought out the notes he had made earlier that morning. “I became certain of your guilt when Margaret was subpoenaed to testify for the prosecution.”

Pollock’s face was frozen in angles of shock. “Margaret?” he said blankly, as if he did not recognize his daughter’s name.

“Perhaps you have forgotten that I was here on the day of the crime. I know that Margaret was in this office with you for over an hour. I saw your behavior when she left. You must have set out immediately to see Ernest Vine.”

“Of course I did. I told the court I did.”

Norman nodded. “I did not know what Margaret had told you that day until she testified. Then I realized the degree to which the stimuli had been intensified. When you learned that your own daughter was rejecting your theories and planning to study with Vine, the conditioning was nearly complete.”

“What in hell,” said Pollock slowly, “are you talking about?”

“Your reaction pattern, and the final stimulus combination that elicited the response of killing Ernest Vine.” Norman looked up from his notes. “It has not been pleasant to watch the pattern developing. You and Vine existed in a competitive environment, to which your behavior adapted steadily.”

He consulted his notes once more. “You were competing with Vine for a position of maximum influence in the profession. As with all competitive behavior there was incipient violence, and that tendency was constantly reinforced by Vine’s attacks on your work. The competitive-aggressive environment was extended to include your personal sphere when Margaret made her announcement. This constituted a major new stimulus, so that by the time you found yourself in Vine’s physical presence that evening, the probability of violent action had increased enormously.”

Brewster Pollock shook his head as if recovering from a blast of sound. “My God! After what I’ve been through, you talk to me like this? You know me! You of all people should know that I’m innocent.”

“I am sorry you find it necessary to take that attitude. Surely I have earned the right to hear the truth.”

Patiently Norman turned back to his notes. “The final stimulus combination was achieved by the presence of the gun. When Vine showed it to you, boasting that he recently had driven off a prowler, you faced what you yourself have called the most potent of all stimuli to acts of violence. Naturally, you responded.”

Pollock clutched the edge of the desk. He felt that if he clutched it tightly enough he somehow could drive the fact of his innocence through the wood between them and into Norman’s awareness. “I

don't believe this," he said. "It can't be happening. You couldn't be so asinine."

Norman's eyes retreated behind narrowed lids, like animals diving for cover. "I beg your pardon?"

"You'd better beg it." Anger began to thaw Pollock's features back into jeering mobility. "I thought they were fools in that courtroom but they've got nothing on you. Even my sophomores wouldn't misapply a theory the way you have."

"Misapply? Do you mean that I have made some error?"

Pollock mimicked him savagely. "Yes, I mean that you have made some error!"

"I fail to see where."

"In the first place, and you'd better get back to first places, back to basics, you're talking as if environmental conditions could elicit behavior absolutely, like a reflex. You've ignored the probabilistic nature of behavior. Environmental conditions only increase the *likelihood* of behavior."

"But that is my point!" Norman leaned forward, his eyes wide once again. "By any statistical method we have ever used, the likelihood of your response on that night was so great as to become a virtual certainty." He tapped his notes. "Your responses to Vine have always been violent. I catalogued them this morning, going back at least ten years, and I could recall no exceptions. Your verbal behavior at the mention of his name, your treatment of the student who argued with you about him, your response when he defeated you for the presidency of the association, your tearing up his articles and throwing his latest book down the incinerator — why, the reinforcement has been continual! Given a confrontation with Vine and the presence of a gun in the environment, the response was absolutely predictable."

"No, it wasn't," Pollock snapped. "There would have been negative contingencies at work — cultural reinforcers and aversive stimuli. You couldn't predict which force would dominate."

Norman spoke stiffly. "Of course I could. I used the methodology of your own book, *Conditions of Serenity*."

"I don't give a damn what you used, you're wrong. I did not kill Ernest Vine and that is final!"

"You had to kill him."

"Don't tell me what I had to do! I'm not one of the animals upstairs!"

Norman's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Your operant behavior was already violent, and environmental conditions were maximized for you that night. How could you have failed to kill Vine?"

"Because I didn't do it, can't you get that through your head? Yes,

I'm glad he's dead. I've wished he would die for years and I sure as hell was mad enough to kill him that night, but I never would really do it. Can't you understand that?"

"How could you avoid it?"

"Because I never considered it seriously, I didn't want to do it, I chose not to do it!"

Norman's lips tightened into wires. "You *chose* not to kill him? You are claiming some inner means of controlling your own behavior? Some special organ" — he smiled contemptuously — "of volition?"

Pollock swore helplessly and turned away.

Briskly Norman folded his notes. "This corroborates my finding. If there was any margin of error or doubt, your verbal behavior has just removed it."

Pollock cast about for some way to reach this creature, some pellet that would coax it back into its familiar cage. "You imbecile!" he finally screamed.

There was no verbal or facial response. Norman's eyes seemed to be two gray opaque discs, impenetrable as steel. As if he were beating against them, Pollock slammed his fists on the desk. Sprays of coffee lurched into the air and fell back as trickles.

"I see," said Norman, "that you are now conditioned to violence completely. It is what I suspected. Your behavior has adapted fully." He reached into his brief case. "In the name of the great achievement which you have ceased to represent I regret what I must do."

The blood drained from Pollock's face as abruptly as if a plug had been pulled. "Where did you get that?"

"It's yours. The gun from the safe. Afterwards I will wipe it and place it in your hand, just as you did with Vine."

"Put it down. Have you gone crazy?"

"Why, no. I have planned everything carefully. This morning I prepared a suicide note, in your handwriting, so that your students and followers will be able to know the truth, to realize that you had become a negative exemplar. I believe that the note will satisfy the police. It is your confession to the act of killing Ernest Vine."

"But I am innocent!"

"That," said Norman, "is not scientifically possible."

And serenely he pulled the trigger.

The World's Softest Touch
by John Pierce [11]

A new Inspector Seal story by John Pierce

In which Inspector Seal, retired, investigates the mysterious death of one Quentin Armitage, scion of an aristocratic New England family, heir to fifty or so millions, former husband of ten teen-age wives, international playboy and darling of the tabloids — found dead in his bedroom on his sixtieth birthday... a murder investigation with a "difference"...

❖

Creighton Seal, the retired Chief Inspector, attended the services for Quentin Armitage, found dead on his bedroom floor on his sixtieth birthday. He saw the giant gray casket and spoke consoling words to Miss Pritchett, lifelong factotum of the deceased. Then he drove his Rolls-Royce north into Cherry Hills. The Rolls derived from his late Aunt Alice, who had bequeathed him as well her house on Crown Street and the means to his retirement from the police. Alice was the favorite sister of his uncle Malcolm Seal, into whose winding driveway he now turned.

Years of writing articles for the *National Geographic* magazine had left Malcolm at loose anchor. He had returned just this morning from a world cruise. He had been a classmate (Princeton, '09) of Doveton Armitage, Quentin's father, and Seal felt that Malcolm would be interested in the death.

Not wholeheartedly.

"Don't want to hear a damn word about him," Malcolm said, puttering about the sprawling desk in his oaken study. "Get yourself some sherry or whatever, but just spare me Quentin Armitage, dead or alive."

"There were odd circumstances," Seal remarked.

"But of course there were if you had your foot in it," the old man grumbled. "In that Daumier world of yours nobody just dies, do they, Creighton? Does anyone just go to bed and die? And now you've come bumbling up here to tell me Quentin was murdered. Is that it?"

"Yes and no."

"That too was predictable. Yes and no. Dammit, can't a man even unpack his luggage and have a drink?"

Seal smiled. He poured himself a sherry and fell into a leather armchair by the mullioned window overlooking the rock garden. He observed his uncle fondly and jiggled his long legs. “How was your trip?”

“Ghastly. We’ve made of our globe one vast jukebox. Guitarists and retired salesmen and Niki-Wiki oriental cameras. Doesn’t anyone have a job any more? Good God, man, I date back to a world of peace and quiet. Read Henry James on how simple and civilized life used to be.”

He found what he was looking for and added it to the contents of a manila folder. “How in the world did *you* get tied up with Quentin Armitage anyway?”

“I’ve met him off and on. Used to watch him play polo thirty years ago.”

“Probably that’s what went wrong with your own game. Happy thing you weren’t watching the day he rode out drunk at Hurlingham and fell off his horse before the Queen. And just lay there. *Lay* there! Degenerate clown. Horrified a whole generation of Americans. How long has that been? I guess eight or nine teen-age wives ago. I presume *they* were all at the funeral, their dumb doll faces aquiver at how they’ll get at that forty or fifty million he lacked the brains to dissipate.”

“He left no issue. There were no blood relatives.”

“So now the disgusting part begins. Or renews itself. What do they call themselves, that conclave of his ex-wives, the what—”

“Anything Times Six.”

“And are they the ones who did him in?”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“But that grubby, I’ll warrant. Complex but grubby. Hand me that brief case, will you? And pour me a Scotch if you’re going to sit there with that silly smile.”

Seal obliged him and twirled his thumbs and rubbed his pencil mustache.

“What’s so Wagnerianly melancholy about it, Creighton, relates to the *quality* of that fortune. This was no guitar-playing, bootlegging, plastics, Hollywood money that Quentin tried to drink up and squander for the tabloids and call girls.

This was good old New England horse-and-buggy textile money before it ever branched into shipping and coffee and transportation and all the rest. I knew Doveton very well indeed. There was quality to that family, and taste and breeding, and when you went to visit those people at Newport or Antibes or Florence you had the rare opportunity of experiencing *in excelsis* the very best of a kind of poise and gentility we’ll never know again.”

"Yes, I wanted to ask you about Doveton."

"What's there to ask or answer? He was a gentleman. A well-bred, nongambling, nonwhoring gentleman who succeeded to the family fortune, went quietly about its administration, walked with dignity, married a fine, artistic, cultivated lady from Philadelphia, then made his one colossal mistake — Quentin. His wife died in the influenza epidemic. Or maybe Quentin poisoned her. Odious child. I knew him when his nose ran and he wiped it on his sleeve. Ferrety. A little sneak. Hotfooting Albert Schweitzer while the old gentleman played Bach on the organ."

"Did Albert improvise a quick cadenza or two?"

"He was not, for the moment, the Albert Schweitzer the world knew and loved. Who was at this funeral besides call girls and readers of dirty magazines?"

"The top brass from all the Armitage enterprises in their long limousines. People I didn't know. Miss Pritchett, of course."

"Poor battered Miss Pritchett. Miss Button Nose. At last she'll get a full night's sleep. Can you fathom riding herd on that lunatic for fifty years? How old is she now?"

"Oh, sixty-seven," Seal said. "You say Quentin was Doveton's one mistake. You wouldn't call Cordelia Coulter his second?"

Cordelia, the stage and silent-film actress, had been Doveton's second wife, Quentin's stepmother.

Malcolm contemplated his rock garden and sighed. "Yes, I suppose she was. But at least that was comprehensible. Cordelia mesmerized people — with her beauty, with her acting talent. I never trust theater people. Never know what they're up to. When Doveton married her? As I recall, by that time — in the twenties — actresses were no longer dismissed as so much flotsam. There was an element of surface respectability to the best of them, and Cordelia Coulter's credits were solid ones, her upbringing rather genteel.

"I suppose he loved and needed her after Emily died. And maybe he had in mind someone to lend a hand with Quentin, of whom he'd just about washed his hands. Quentin irritated him. Then she got herself killed on a road outside of Naples with some Italian adventurer, which must have been the last straw. The things a pretty face does to the judgment. Doveton should have foreseen it. Cordelia had a habit of just walking off, strolling out of a room, away from a lawn party, out of a life."

"And Doveton?"

"Punctured him like an old blimp. He turned over Quentin — in hysterics — lock, stock, and barrel to that governess, Pritchett, and went off and began behaving strangely."

"In what way?"

"Various. Went exploring the Amazon in a pith helmet. Became a recluse, delegated all management responsibilities, tried to be a Blake mystic. It was not comfortable being around him. I went to *his* funeral when he died of something in '32."

Seal finished his sherry. "And where was motherless Quentin during this Amazonian and mystic period?"

"Getting thrown out of prep schools, as I remember, Pritchett in tow. No college would ever keep him. Therein one of his more imperishable statements to the world press: 'Why go to college when I'm a multimillionaire?' "

"Pretty shaky childhood for someone coming into all that money."

"Play that on your cello, Inspector. No man could have been the fool Quentin Armitage was without a well-devised and meticulously rehearsed master plan and constant, total dedication and daily morning prayer. 'Guide me, oh, Lord, to some really revolting new atrocity.' "

"Come on now. You don't mean that?"

"I'm afraid I'm serious. This man was the sole heir to a distinguished fortune of fifty or so million. *Stayed* in the headlines. Nude yachting parties. Brawls with the police in half the countries of Europe. Banished out of France. Hundred-mile-an-hour auto chases, and those fine lovely homes built by four generations of Armitages handed over to those gum-chewing, fortune-hunting women."

"They had little sentimental meaning for him?"

"Sentiment be damned. Sheer round-the-clock drunkenness. One wife, all right, or two, or even three, but ten? *Ten?* Carhops. Women out of bars. And always about nineteen years old. Not one of them stayed with him as. long as six months — one lasted only four days — but longevity had no bearing on the scale of payment, did it? One million in U.S. currency — no alimony — to each one as she walked out the door to some new assignation.

"Well, no, it's not even that, is it? It's afterward that this frightful amorality creeps in. These same women following him here, settling in town with their lovers or whatever, using his home and grounds and swimming pool and bedrooms for a long loud bacchanalia while he sits there all shriveled up in his oversize walking shorts and claps his hands to the music."

"You're going to get indigestion again, Uncle."

Malcolm subsided. "Yes, I know. I'll join you in one more drink. Go ahead. You were saying Quentin was murdered."

"Giving 'murdered' a bit of leeway, that was Miss Pritchett's interpretation."

"You?"

"I didn't disagree."

"Meaning you don't know."

"There's not much anyone could ever do about it if we did know. About thirty people — ex-wives, freeloaders, and petty thieves — showed up uninvited at Quentin's place Monday night to celebrate his impending sixtieth birthday. He'd had a stroke and some heart seizures; his blood pressure was a mile high. This was well known to all of them, that he'd been in and out of the hospital and in oxygen tents.

"He had no business eating the rich foods they brought in. He should not have been drinking or smoking cigarettes or staying up past midnight. But at their urging he did all these. He made it upstairs after they'd left. Miss Pritchett, who had dozed, discovered the party was over and went in to check on him.

"He was dead on the floor of his bedroom, just short of the balcony overlooking the pool. The glycerin pills he always carried in his trousers pocket were not in his pocket. They were on a dressing table not six feet away. No evidence that he tried to reach them."

"This *was* a coronary?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's giving 'murder' leeway, all right. More like giving it the Gulf of Mexico for a turning basin. What is all this nonsense?"

"It has to do with the pattern of his relationship with the six ex-wives who hung around. The other four seem to have taken better care of their money."

"Let's slow down now. You're intimating that these six, these recipients of those huge settlements, had gone through that money in two or four or six or however many years?"

"That's our story."

"And they came back for more and he was giving it to them?"

"He's always been the world's softest touch."

"Appalling. Simply appalling. What is this Anything they so coyly called themselves?"

"Anything Times Six. It came about accidentally. Some local TV impresario hit on the bright idea of having the six ex-wives of playboy Daddy Quent together on a show. They got up a singing act and chose that name for themselves. They did a parody on a musical number from a Broadway show. Their version was:

"Anything he can do we can do better;

"Anything they can do we can do too.

"In which offering, in line one, they make crude reference to Quentin's sexual incapacity, a point they've elsewhere belabored — he never fathered a child — and in the second line ventured to climb aboard the Women's Liberation wagon. Tasteless performance. They

couldn't sing, but they displayed a lot of firm flesh and it got them considerable publicity.

"So they decided to hold onto the appellation — Anything Times Six. And decided to milk it even further. Loudly announced that they were gang-authoring a memoir, *Our Six Lives with Daddy Quent.* Boudoir secrets never told, unrevealed facts about the Armitage family and fortune, snapshots, intimate letters, etc.

"And he watched this unfold and continued to finance them?"

"All this, or most, was done very naughtily — good clean fun, no surface malice. It was difficult to know what he thought until they made the mistake of hooking some private papers from Miss Pritchett for source material, some of it having to do with Cordelia. He was always getting robbed. He was not at all well."

"Just how unwell was he?"

"The stroke had jammed up his speech, but depending on how tired or rested he was, he could get around and make good enough sense. Other times he'd just sit like a little monkey by the pool, brooding or cackling or spooning baby food or watching a bird. You never knew."

"But able to sign checks."

"Oh, yes. He parceled it out willy-nilly."

"And just what was this bonehead Pritchett doing about it?"

"She couldn't stop it. It was what he wanted to do. That's why she called me the first time."

Pritchett had telephoned him one night at eleven. He was just in from his Aunt Alice's upstate farm where he had disposed of two Santa Gertrudis bulls. She had been calling him for two hours and she apologized excessively. But she had heard Quentin speak of having known him in the past, and now she called in desperation. This was life or death. She needed advice, she did not know what to do. Could he drive out and help her? She would have sent a car for him but could not locate the chauffeur.

Without changing from the black sports shirt, black slacks, and loafers he'd worn to the farm, Seal got back into his Rolls and found the pillared driveway off Grantland Trail and drove up among the trees to the well-lighted old home. Miss Pritchett, a slight harrowed gray lady, met him at the door.

What struck him was not the great Spanish furniture or the paneled walls or the rich dark carpeting but the carnage — the drink glasses and ashtrays overturned, long-play records scattered, plates of food and dislodged sofa cushions and debris. They exited where floodlights lit the swimming pool and the white statuary and oleander. Lawn furniture was in the water, china and glassware were shattered

on the tile, a white wrought-iron bench was overturned.

Alone, small and comatose in a white chair at the far comer, was Quentin Armitage, his bald head nodding over his paunch, his spindly brown wrists on the chair arms. He wore rope sandals and walking shorts. His tanned narrow shoulders and small hollow chest were bare.

"I'm too old to manage him alone now," Miss Pritchett said timidly, "and could not find the chauffeur or the gardener."

Seal easily picked up the old fellow and followed her inside and up a curving staircase to the capacious bedroom she indicated. He lowered him onto the canopied bed. As he did so he heard her sobbing.

Gently Seal put an arm about her shoulders and steered her to a Morris chair. He stood near the French windows at the balcony. Someone was down there, among the trees. He saw the glow of a lit cigarette.

"Tell me more about it, Miss Pritchett."

"It's all here in front of you. He's very *sick*. He's under strict instructions from the best doctors in the country. And they *know* this and they come here and ransack the place and pillage the kitchen and steal his possessions and profane the bedrooms and get drunk and get *him* drunk and upset and it's only a matter of time."

"You say 'they?' "

"Those ex-wives of his. Anything Times Six," she said contemptuously. "Strumpets. They went through all that money they clipped him for. Now it's driving them wild, the thought of the millions up for grabs and them without a proper claim to it. They come and hang on him and rub his head and bring him little gifts and all the while they're ridiculing him and laughing behind his back. And feeding him drinks until they can shove a checkbook in his hand for whatever they think he'll sign."

"He signs?"

"Oh, sure, always. For all his follies he's always been a *kind* man, Inspector. You go to his business people and ask about the charities he supports — Boys Towns, orphanages in Europe, colleges, hospitals, he never turns anyone down. But this. A thousand here. Two thousand there. One of them got away with his Jaguar. Two Picasso sketches given to him personally. Jewelry, personal effects — it's all sickening."

"Does he give these people any large amounts?"

"No, not tremendous."

"And you have no control?"

She shook her head. "Last week I called the police. He was furious. He said, '*I* know what I'm doing.' " She indicated Armitage — the last of the Armitages — diminutive on the great bed. "That's what he's doing. Letting them kill him."

Seal considered. “I’m not sure what could be done, Miss Pritchett, unless you’d choose to have him declared incompetent, get a power of attorney and an injunction against those people coming here.”

“But he’s *not* incompetent. Left alone he makes perfect sense. No, I wouldn’t do that if I could.”

“You’ve talked to his attorneys?”

“Until my head aches. They suggest I hire some strong fellow who’d throw them right out of here. But that’s just like calling the police, and he’d rebel.”

He tried to think of something. “It’s not as if he’s completely taken in by them and, say, giving away large chunks of money.”

“No, they’ve tried that. He knows better. I’m sure this is what makes them furious, inspires all that meanness and humiliation. If you could see them taunting and cajoling him until he gets out on that balcony there and does those inept embarrassing imitations of Mussolini or Hitler or Juliet before a lot of parasites and strangers, and down there they’re snickering while they clean out the food and the liquor and wander through the house. All those millions of dollars — so near and yet so far.”

From the shadow Seal watched the cigarette beneath the ebony tree below. It arched out and into the pool. “I wish I could do something, Miss Pritchett. It’s more a legal matter.”

“Might I ask you then, since he knows you, could you, say, drop by for lunch someday this week and be company to him? Try to find out anything I might not know?”

“I’d be happy to,” he said. “Were you aware, Miss Pritchett, that there’s still someone down there by the pool?”

“Oh, yes, I knew it. That’s Amanda, the last of his wives.”

“Two years ago, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. Married him, stayed a week, picked up her money, and ran to Tijuana. Somebody in Las Vegas took her for every dime.”

“What’s her problem now?”

“The same game they’re all playing — Anything Times Six, whatever it means. They’re all deadly suspicious of each other, those six. They’re terrified that one of them is going to slip in here some night, get him juiced up and before a Justice of the Peace for a remarriage. That’s why they usually come together. They watch each other like cobras.”

“Any danger of such a remarriage?”

She laughed harshly. “Lord, no! He despises them the same way they laugh at him. They’re just too dumb to know it. Sometimes I think that might be the heart of it. He enjoys watching them being the kind of damned fool he used to be.”

“So Amanda’s on guard at the gate.”

"Or toying with the idea of slipping up here later and scoring a few points. Or walking off with the color TV. No way. I'll lock her little fanny out. I sleep in the next room and I hear everything."

Seal left her getting out Quentin's pajamas. He went down the staircase. In his pocket was the $6,200 in one-hundred dollar bills he had realized from the sale of the bulls. As he came out and skirted the pool he had these bills in his hand. He counted them conspicuously. Peripherally he saw the white minidress and the tanned thighs as he counted. When she spoke he feigned surprise.

"Payday?" she said. The voice was hard and toneless. He saw an attractive blonde woman of 35, her hair in a becoming bun; she wore large round gray-tinted glasses.

"Didn't see you." He finished with and pocketed the money.

"Nice night," she said.

"Place looks like a hog wallow."

"He's got servants," she said. "You seem to be doing all right."

"Old friend of mine, Daddy."

"Yeah, I saw the Rolls. What's your secret?"

"My secret? That everyone's got a secret."

"And you know one of his."

He smiled.

"I'm Amanda Armitage," she said. "Cool your loafers."

Seal took a chair near her. "I saw you on television. Cute."

"I never got your name."

"Quo Vadis," he said with a straight face.

"What's that, Italian?"

"Sicilian."

"Well, well," she said. "What part?"

"The central highlands."

"I don't think I know anyone there."

"They're hard to get to know."

"I never heard him mention you."

"You probably didn't stick around long enough."

"Don't tell me," she said. "A week after that Mexican divorce he hit the ground like a watermelon."

"There you go. Haste makes waste, doesn't it?"

"That's what I need, all righty. A Bible reading."

"Take it out on yourself, sugar. You got yours. What you did with it is your problem."

"Yeah, I guess I lack your business head, or your angle. How'd you get it while he was passed out? Pritchett? She never gave anything away."

Seal smiled again.

"Well. Congratulations, I guess," she said. "I guess there's enough

for everybody."

"Not if you people keep this stuff up. You're just about to be short one golden goose."

"Tragic loss. The only time he'll sign a checkbook is when he's three-quarters loaded. Nickel and diming around here for what we do. He likes young naked women. So we swim naked in his pool while he watches. Watching is about all he could ever do."

"You kill him you won't even have a pool."

"Don't kid a kidder. There's a hundred grand in an insurance policy for Amanda. And I've got a New York lawyer and a million-dollar spinal defect with traumatic complications dating to that marriage."

"What'd he do, stone you on the way out with a vitamin pill? What about the others, all spinal?"

"That would be a little corny, wouldn't it? Charleyne has psychiatric damage. Dawne's got a baby she forgot about. Cherrye's got some mysterious papers he's supposed to have signed. The others aren't talking."

He sat a while. "Well."

"Well what?"

"I'd lay off this strongarm business if I were you. Kill him, there could be bad feeling everywhere."

"Yeah, well you go back and tell The Godfather to take it up with A. A. Daddy Quent was bombed twenty years before I was born and there's nobody holding his mouth open and pouring it down him."

"Suit yourself," Seal said, standing. "Don't let the mosquitoes get you."

"Thanks millions," she said.

"Ciao."

"Delectable," Malcolm said. "Except that I can't see but what he's getting just what he spent forty years asking for."

"It could be you're too much with Henry James and Edwardian greenery mid the blueblooded, dignified, royalty-loving Armitages Senior. Who did not give one damn about Quentin. Hire him a nanny. Do something with him — we'll be in Greece. And here comes Cordelia, this empty-headed, self-centered actress, testing her subtle skills on his confusion. What else did these people wire him for but disaster?

"*You* see Quentin, the be-crazed satyr, lunging around the continent with his checkbook, taking a beauty queen, losing her; buying a yacht, wrecking it; standing drunk on the platform of a private railroad car or insulting the honored Duke of Bulgaria. But like Henry James you deny him a hangover.

"You give him no deep feelings. You permit Doveton to go decorously askew after Cordelia's defection but refuse Quentin — who experienced this tenfold — the same privilege. I learn that he was leveled, devastated, increasingly embittered each time one of those hookers walked out on him in the middle of the night and ran singing her sad song to the tabloids. The first one who left him, he spent sixteen hours in a bar on the Riviera and then walked out into the Mediterranean fully clothed and would have kept on to Corsica if someone hadn't pulled him out. It was Pritchett, the hired help, who assumed the whole parental function, whether as babysitter, governess, night nurse, mother confessor, getter-out-of-jail, financial manager, whatever."

"He continues to flout logic, my boy. What kind of 'devastation' when he stands now at his door yelling, 'Y'all come?' "

"He never invited them. They just came when it began to appear he was dying. Only when illness called a halt to the marrying did he find time to sum them up for what they were. He was not quite so dumb in the end."

Conversation was a long brooding silence shattered by volcanic observations from Quentin Armitage. They sat by the pool at mid-morning. They drank iced tea. The grounds had been cleaned and tailored, and sunlight shone bright on the white statuary. When Quentin spoke it was haltingly, sometimes laboriously, overloud. Or he would fall into himself and intently watch a tree or send his mind back through the years.

"YOU COME TONIGHT," he shouted suddenly. "*ALL WIVES SWIM NAKED.*" Then he lapsed into silent laughter, laughing until his old shoulders shook and his bald head bobbed and saliva ran down his chin.

The laughter made Seal smile. "I'll look at my engagement calendar."

"ALL NAKED. YOU TAKE PICK," Quentin yelled, and laughed silently and then went far away.

In time he pointed at Seal. "You polo?"

"I played some. My Uncle Malcolm had some ponies. I watched you play long ago."

He nodded vehemently. "I polo. Play with Cecil Smith. You know?"

"Remember him well."

Armitage meditated. "Ten trainloads whiskey, ten wives, ten polo ponies. Fine biography." This triggered helpless laughter. He choked his way out of it.

"More interesting than mine," Seal remarked.

A long silence. A sparrow fluttered water in a birdbath.

"WHOLE WORLD CONCERNED HOW I SPEND MONEY," Armitage shouted fiercely. "*EVERYBODY*."

"Shouldn't bother you."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Doesn't. How would you?"

"How would I what?"

"Spend fifty million dollars."

Seal smiled. "I haven't the slightest idea."

"EXACTLY," he exploded. *"NOBODY KNOWS.* But tell me how not." He pointed to himself. "I know. Good time. Naked girls. Young."

"Wisest course of all."

Busy concentrated silence.

"Leave to government, my money?" He shook his head dourly. "No. Vietnam. Politicians, South America. Farm subsidy for not growing. Fifty million gone one day." He waved his arms. "*GOVERNMENT ALL MONEY GONE ONE DAY."*

Seal watched a hummingbird flying backward and observed a discreet silence before he ventured an opinion. "But listen, Quentin, may I say something?"

"YOU TALK GO AHEAD."

"You can't let these women and their friends rile you up. It's bad for you. You can't drink the way you did the other night. You know what your doctors say."

Had these words been received anywhere? In the long labored silence Seal wondered.

Finally Armitage spoke, this time quietly. "Bums," he said. "All bums. Want money. Make fun of me. 'Anything they can do.' " He chuckled. "Write book about me? I slap injunction. Who cares."

"Just don't let them stuff you with liquor and cigarettes."

"All swim naked," he said, and gave way again, laughing until his tea glass fell and shattered and coughs convulsed his body and Miss Pritchett came running from the house.

"You are such an unrelenting ham, Creighton. Why must you clothe everything in the garb of a mystery story? Come out with it, what's missing? We have a poor little rich boy who turns to alcohol and searches for love. He fails, destroys himself, becomes a joke figure, a senile little Prometheus cackling and salivating as they dance naked about the pool singing *Anything they can do,* and darting in for quick strikes at his checkbook. What was that about Cordelia you've magpied away? What was this theft that occurred?"

"I like to build suspense carefully," Seal answered.

"I like, after five months in a ship's cabin, to unpack my bags."

"I believe in justice grinding slowly."

“Two hours is glacial.”

“I am telling it as it was revealed to me.”

“It’s your hobby, not mine.”

Armitage died three weeks later. A boisterous birthday celebration had ripped the house and grounds.

“I think he quit caring,” Miss Pritchett said. “I think he just let them do it — kill him. He said, ‘I’m too tired anyway, and what better way to die than at a party.’ After your first talk with him that morning — two days after — something happened that seemed to change everything.”

It was almost four in the morning. She had telephoned Seal before anyone. They sat in the bedroom where Quentin Armitage lay on the parquetry flooring near the windows to the balcony. Below was the disarray Seal had witnessed once before.

“What did happen?” Seal asked.

“The bright year of his life was with Cordelia Coulter. This was the person he loved. And so I kept from him the truth about her disappearance and death in that accident — that she had walked out with a man and was not coming back, and did not even care enough about him to say goodbye. Clever actress, you know, fooled him thoroughly. She left me a little note — where to send her clothes and things. Not a word in it about Quentin — not a ‘love’ or a ‘goodbye.’ I kept this note for a reason. It went far toward explaining Quentin to people who didn’t understand.”

She regarded the body on the floor.

“Two nights after you came and talked to him those people got into my personal papers and took some things, that Coulter note among them. I assume they planned to use it in that book. Then I don’t know what happened. Whoever it was — Amanda, I suspect — must have had too much to drink and gone off and forgotten them. In the morning when I saw my file open I was frantic. I ran everywhere and almost called you, but then went down into the library and there was Quentin. He had found it — a manila folder; he was reading what was inside. He had read that cold note from Cordelia.

“ ‘I never wanted you to know, Quentin,’ I said.

“He smiled and said, ‘I knew it long ago.’

“But the fact of their having done this — gone prowling through my private papers and sat there in his own house reading them — well, that did it. He never gave them another nickel. But they kept coming, and came in force last night, and here he is.” She looked at Seal questioningly. “You spoke to him, Inspector: Would you think, by any stretch of the imagination, that he was at the last at least partially happy?”

Seal turned from the balcony. “Cheer up, Miss Pritchett. For forty-five years they’ve been hustling him, and it always stung. Rest assured that Quentin Armitage, ill as he was, reduced to spectator sports, was pulling off the biggest hustle of all. You know how laughter convulsed him. Who knows but what he got upstairs here and reviewed the evening and laughed himself — yes, laughed himself to death.”

“Explain ‘hustle,’ ” said Malcolm.

“Simple mathematics. The combined duration of the time spent with him in marriage by those six women comes to less than six months. For that-allotting each wife the million she took him for — he paid six million dollars, or, say, one million a month.

“Since his stroke they’ve been visiting him. for a year, all six of them in a body — or six bodies. For those *en masse* attentions over a year’s time, according to Pritchett’s bookkeeping — the checks he signed for them, the items they purloined — he doled out a little over one hundred thousand total, or roughly nine thousand a month.

“Call him a lover of the beautiful, his genre the young female figure. But allot him, in his final year, some business sense. He arrived at a group rate:

“1 wife $1,000,000 per month

“vs.

“6 ex-wives $9,000 per month total.

“Nine thousand into a million; say, one hundred. Thus for approximately one one-hundredth of what he had paid them individually, he now had all six of them performing regularly in the raw — bringing him gifts, cuddling him, rubbing his old bald head. And no threat of walkout or divorce suit or conjugal liability. Divide six wives into nine thousand to get the monthly fee to each and the fraction becomes infinitesimal to a man with his millions. Not bad at all. Can you or I summon up six naked beauty queens by just sitting by a swimming pool with a drink? Are there, for an incurable invalid and nature lover, worse ways to die?”

“I must score him one point there,” said Malcolm, “but the charge, you said, was murder.”

“Murder with leeway, I said. Or with permission. Say he permitted them to induce his death, which, in his condition, was not altogether unwelcome. Joined them in a last clamorous wassail, heard the distant voice call out, ‘Time, gentlemen,’ and forewent the heart pills that might have saved him.”

“So they get their insurance policies.”

“Those proved completely nonexistent.”

“What about the will, if any? On what structure will the six mount their assault?”

“On the holdings of his widow, Gladys Pritchett, if they’ve got time to waste. Pritchett was taken to wife in a secret ceremony just after the bungled theft of the Cordelia Coulter papers. He married Pritchett to settle the financial thing once and for all. But so as not to lose his nude act prematurely, he swore her to secrecy about the marriage until after his death. He left her everything in a new and final will.”

“Good heavens. Wife number *eleven?* Must be a new American record. And the Anything Times Six girls?”

“They, beneath the revelation of Pritchett as widow, made the newspaper obituary columns. Note the second line of their naughty theme song: *Anything they* — men — *can do, we can do better.* He gave them their chance to so demonstrate. Do this better, he said, and named them as pallbearers. Pallbearers, the ex-wives Amanda, June, Charleyne, Dawne, Steffanye, and Cherrye Armitage.

“At the foot of that vast casket in the chapel was a large floral wreath Quentin had personally arranged for. On it, in large red letters on a wide golden ribbon, was his riposte to their martial air:

“Anything?”

“Magnificent,” said Malcolm. “And did the six indeed pallbear better?”

“They failed to show in any guise. Not hide nor hair nor floral contribution.”

“Back to the streets and the bistros, back to Jiffy-Burger Number Four.”

Seal said, “I doubt they’ve got a hundred bucks between them since he shut the cut-off valve. While they laughed and sang and made faces behind his back he digested the nubile scenery and prepared them — for worse than nothing.”

“As you have me for three hours. The licentious old fool. Which reminds me of something I wanted to ask you. Did you, ah, accept his invitation that night to the, uh, informal swimming party? Get to know Amanda any better?”

“Uncle Malcolm!”

The Scrabble Clue
by Francis M. Nevins, Jr. [12]

A new detective story by Francis M. Nevins, Jr.

Introducing Fred Buford, retired cop and former instructor at the Police Academy, in, paradoxically, his last case... We all like detective stories that end with a whiplash of revelation. Here's one that ends with a double whiplash...

❖

When Fred Buford swung the coupe into his home street he found a police car blocking the entrance to the parking area. Two more official cars stood in the paved crescent in front of the apartment building, their red roof globes whirling in the five o'clock twilight.

Fred made a K-turn and pulled into a vacant space on the street, hefted the armful of sporting periodicals he had checked out of the library, and entered the high-rise. The brown-uniformed doorman sat in an alcove off the foyer, being questioned by two hard-eyed men in shapeless gray suits. Fred punched the elevator button for 22.

Even out in the hall, as he fumbled the key into the front door, he could smell the aroma of Bunny's meatloaf. Finest cook an old man ever had, he reflected, and the finest daughter too, turning the biggest bedroom in the apartment over to him, buying him that earphone attachment so he could listen to the radio late into the night without disturbing her.

He shambled into the large airy apartment and Bunny Buford, tall and slender in green blouse and slacks, came into the front room from the kitchen to greet him. Fred lowered his bulk onto the sofa and unlaced his shoes with a sigh, replacing them with soft-soled slippers. When he was comfortable he looked up at his daughter and asked in his cracked rumble, "What's all the excitement downstairs?"

"There's been a murder in the building, Daddy." Bunny's calm tone was the product of 28 years lived in the shadow of violent crime. She took off her glasses and wiped the steam of cooking from their lenses with the edge of her apron. "The Umber woman down in 16-C, the blonde who liked purple miniskirts. Someone cut her up with a carving knife. A Detective-Sergeant Duffy came by two hours ago looking for you and I told him I expected you back about this time."

Where else can a widower ex-cop past the mandatory retirement age spend his days but at the library, Fred wondered. He cupped his chins in a liver-spotted hand and shook his fringe of sparse white hair in disapproval. “Duffy, huh? There was a Duffy in my course on Techniques of Crime Detection at the Academy year before last. Flaming idiot if you ask me. If he’s in charge five will get you ten the case goes into the Unsolved basket.”

“He looked upset when I saw him.” The girl’s brown eyes brightened and her button nose twitched in sudden excitement so that for a moment she almost looked like a real rabbit. “Daddy, you don’t think he wants you to help with the case?”

Fred tried to suppress his own soaring hope of relief from the stagnation of eleven months’ retirement. “Who the hell would he ask for help if not me?” he demanded. “If he doesn’t come back here with hat in hand he’s a bigger fool than—”

At which point the door chime sounded and the veteran Police Academy instructor jumped to his feet in expectation.

“Great meatloaf, Miss Buford, best I’ve had since my mother passed away,” mumbled tall gawky Sergeant Duffy around his final mouthful of meat and baked potato.

“She’s a great cook,” Fred agreed heartily, “and a fine freelance commercial artist too, I’ll have you know. You should have her show you the sketches in her workroom sometime when you’re not on a case. You won’t believe this, Duffy, but when she was born I was very disappointed I didn’t have a son. Now I wouldn’t trade her for all the sons in the world.” He threw a fatherly arm around Bunny’s shoulders and she smiled up at him proudly.

The young sergeant neatly laid his knife and fork on the edge of his plate. “Gosh, sir, I’m so glad I noticed that F. BUFORD on the apartment-house directory downstairs and figured it must be you. And I’m even gladder,” he went on, inadvertently cutting off something Fred had begun to say, “that you don’t mind helping out on this one, Captain, ah, I guess it’s Mr. Buford now, isn’t it?”

“Let’s take our coffee over to the couch while my daughter is clearing the table,” Fred suggested, “and you can tell me the details.”

“Well, Cap, ah, sir,” the rookie sergeant began, “as you know, the victim’s name was Trudy Umber. She used to be married to Will Umber of Craven and Umber, the ad agency downtown, but they separated two years ago and she moved in here and has been living off a separation allowance. Off that and a little sideline she had. The old badger game. She’d let herself be picked up by a well-to-do older man — a married man, of course — and jump into the sack with him a few times while her accomplice made like Cecil B. DeMille with a

camera hidden in the bedroom closet of her apartment. Then a few weeks later she'd put the bite on the guy — money in return for the negatives.

"The only unusual thing about the way she played it is that she'd put the bite on the guys herself; most of the time, as you know, it's the male accomplice, the cameraman, who makes the approach to the sucker. She had six guys paying off regularly until today, when it seems one of them got fed up."

"If you know so much about her activities," Fred rumbled, "why didn't you go after her while she was still alive?" He swallowed black coffee from a tall thick mug.

"Oh, we just found all this out today, sir, from her diary and the victims. We found a, well, a sex diary hidden inside a stereo speaker on a wall mount. Names all her marks, gives them report cards, tells how much she collected from each — the whole works, except there's no mention of who her partner is, but we'll get him soon enough."

Fred crossed his slippered feet and folded his hands on his bulging abdomen. "The dubious pleasure of wading through the tramp's diary is all yours," he grunted. "Who found her body?"

"Today's the day the window washers come around to do the outside of the building. One of the crew happened to look in from the outside of 16-C and saw her lying in a pool of blood and wooden chips in the dining room and gave the alarm. She was stabbed seven times with a long-bladed knife which the killer took away with him. Very messy. Medical examiner gives the time of death as between twelve thirty and two o'clock."

"Wooden chips?" Fred's gruff tone suggested annoyance at the unusual detail.

"Yessir. She must have been a brainy sort of tramp. Instead of watching soap operas or game shows on TV during the day she played Scrabble with herself. You know, the game where you make words out of little wood blocks with letters of the alphabet printed on one side?"

"I've played the game, Sergeant," Fred remarked drily.

"Well, sir, she had the board set up on the dining-room table and was in the middle of a game with herself when the killer rang the bell. Apparently he brought his own knife — none seems to be missing from her apartment. Anyway, he stabbed her seven times, wiped the knife on a bathroom towel, and took the knife away with him.

"But she wasn't quite dead yet. Mass of blood that she was, she dragged herself over to the table and pulled down the Scrabble box with all the letters in it and rooted around among those scattered little letters on the floor and palmed two of them before she died. When we found her, her other hand was clawed among the letters like she was looking for more of them."

"What two letters did she pick up?"

"An R and an F," Duffy said. "No way of telling which letter was meant to come first, of course."

"It's still a damned good clue," his old instructor pointed out, "if you know how to use it."

"Sir, I learned from you." Duffy's voice rang with pride. "The woman's diary gives the full names of all six men she was blackmailing. And it happens that two of them have initials that match."

"Who are they?"

"One of them is Roger Farris, a vice-president at the United Electronics main office. Tall, good-looking, fiftyish, standard executive-type complete with a society wife and two kids in college that hate his guts and a big fancy house out in Spruceknoll. In other words, one hell of a lot of respectability to preserve and a strong motive for killing the tramp who threatened his respectability. The other one is Franklin Roosevelt Quist. You've heard of him, I guess. The big civil rights lawyer?"

"I've heard," Fred replied laconically. "Had a run-in with him the year before I retired over something one of his clients had decided in his infinite wisdom was a case of police brutality. Of course, as you pointed out, Duffy, there's no way of telling which of the two letters was meant to be read first."

"There's a bigger problem than that, sir," Duffy said. "The boys have already talked to both suspects and both of them claim to have alibis. Between twelve thirty and two o'clock this afternoon Roger Farris says he was sitting at the head table at the Sheraton Central campaign luncheon for Senator Huggins, and our friend the defender of the oppressed was downtown in Superior Court arguing a civil rights case."

"Political lunches are organized chaos," Fred reminded the younger man. "Courts take recesses. If you can't crack one of those two alibis, you'd better find another line of work."

"Oh, we're working on them, sir," Duffy assured his former instructor hastily. "But of course we have no positive proof that the killer is one of those two. Maybe the girl's partner was named Roy Fox or Frank Rush or something and maybe he killed her in a dispute over sharing the payoff money. Maybe a homicidal maniac did it. Anyway, just as a matter of routine we've been checking out every person in this building whose initials are RF or FR or whose first or last name begins with one of those combinations." The young sergeant lowered his eyes for a moment in embarrassment. "Uhh — were you in the library all day today, sir?" he asked Fred Buford.

In the sudden silence they could hear the friendly clink of dishes

from the kitchen.

Fred glared at the hapless rookie. “Don’t you think you should read me your damn Miranda warning before you ask a question like that, *Sergeant*?” Then he spread his cracked lips in a feeble attempt at a grin. “I went for a bite to eat at Leo’s Luncheonette around the corner from the library sometime after noon. I always eat there when I spend the day browsing in the Reading Room. Leo’s is jammed at lunchtime, I don’t remember my waitress and didn’t see anyone there I knew.” He held out his wrists as if for the handcuffs.

Duffy raised his hands almost in horror. “Oh, no, sir, that was just a routine question, I was just being thorough like you taught us at the Academy. You were the last FR in the building that I hadn’t covered, but, my gosh, you’re no more a suspect than — well, than I am!”

“Glad to hear it, Duffy. You’re showing good cop sense.” The thought crossed Fred’s mind that the sergeant had not been quite as thorough as he stated he had been, but residual resentment of the rookie’s line of questioning led him to give Duffy no more than the subtlest hint. “Actually, I never talked to the Umber woman more than to say hello in the elevator. I only knew her name because an old man with no job gets curious about his neighbors, but I doubt she even knew my name or my daughter’s.”

“Uhhh — but you will come down to headquarters tomorrow and help me work on those alibis?” Duffy requested awkwardly.

“Oh, hell, sure I’ll help. Nothing better to do.” Fred carefully kept all his joy at being asked out of his voice.

“Gee, thanks a million, sir, I sure appreciate it!” Duffy rose fumblingly from his armchair. “Would ten o’clock be too early for you?”

Fred frowned as he hoisted his thick-bellied bulk to his feet. “Old folks don’t need much sleep. I’ll see you at eight.”

“Yessir.”

“Just one thought before you go,” he said at the door. “Husband and wife are separated, husband has to lay out cash to live up to their separation agreement. If husband finds out wife is also getting goodies from lovers, he might be tempted to cut off his payments the fast way, with a knife. And he might be even more tempted to stick a couple of Scrabble letters in her hand so as to make things hot for a couple of her lovers, assuming of course that he first took a peek into her diary like you did and found out who they were, or learned some other way. If I were you I’d look into what Mr. Will Umber was doing early this afternoon.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll do that. And thanks again for all your help. And for dinner. See you tomorrow, sir!” They shook hands in the corridor by the elevator and Fred shuffled back into the apartment and into the

kitchen where Bunny was finishing the dishes.

"I heard most of what you two were saying," his daughter said, handing him the meat platter to dry. "You haven't had that light of excitement in your eyes since the day you retired."

Fred picked up a dishtowel and wiped the water from the dinnerware with vigorous strokes. "Yes, indeed," he crowed, "when the kids get stuck they got to call in the old man. And with a lump like that Duffy in charge you can be damn sure it won't be solved without me! Why, throughout this entire day and evening he's believed that F. BUFORD on the board downstairs meant me, and never even wondered how an old man on a cop's retirement pension could afford the rent on a big apartment like this. I threw him enough hints, too, like when I mentioned that a long time ago I'd wanted a son. Just like I said before he came — a flaming idiot."

Bunny almost dropped a plate laughing. "Oh, Daddy! Were you seriously going to suggest me as a suspect?"

Fred chuckled back at his daughter, enjoying the joke hugely. "Well, as a point of routine he should have covered it. After all, look at the case a really good cop could build against you. When can't a woman working the badger game do the usual thing and have her male accomplice make the approach to the marks? When the accomplice is a female, too. What's the most convenient way for the accomplice to operate the hidden camera in the other girl's apartment? Live in the same building herself and use the fire stairs. When someone's dying and using her last breath to spell out her murderer's name, is she going to reach for the killer's initials or try to spell out the name? Spell out the name, of course. It's an open-and-shut case — a dispute between the partners over the payoff money like Duffy suggested."

"Oh, Daddy, you're beautiful." Bunny blew a playful kiss at her father in appreciation of the jest. "But I think you've been hitting too many whodunits down in that Reading Room. For the sake of my reputation you'd better switch to some nice safe biographies! Seriously, Daddy, who do you think did it?"

"My money's on Franklin Roosevelt Quist." The old policeman savored every syllable of the civil-rights lawyer's name. "That last point I made about the Umber woman going for the name instead of the initials makes a lot of sense, you see. And even if she was going for the initials, if she was trying to name Roger Farris she wouldn't have been clawing out for more letters at the moment she died, the way Duffy said she was, because she already had Farris' initials. In the game of Scrabble, daughter, there is only one Q — and she couldn't find it. That's what she was hunting around for, desperately trying to add it to the F and R in her hand before the curtain came down. We'll

crack his alibi tomorrow."

"Be careful drying that meat knife," cautioned Frederika Buford, known to her father as Bunny. "It's very sharp."

The Theft of the Legal Eagle
by Edward D. Hoch [13]

A new Nick Velvet story by Edward D. Hoch

Between new Nick Velvet stories we often wonder: what strange, unusual, but valueless thing will Nick steal next? As *you know, Nick is a unique thief. He doesn't steal money or jewels or art objects or anything else of value, and yet for stealing something worthless he demands and gets a minimum fee of $20,000.*

Well, this time Nick "bends his rule a bit" — but only a bit. He is hired to steal a stone eagle that weighs 3000 pounds. One and one-half tons of stone might be worth something as stone, but not much. So why was it worth $20,000 to Hamish Blake? Again Nick Velvet has to be both a thief and a 'tec...

❖

"That's it, right across the street," Hamish Blake said. "One-and-a-half tons of stone eagle."

Nick Velvet peered out the window with some distaste. "It's not exactly pretty, is it?"

"It's not meant to be pretty, Mr. Velvet. It's meant to represent the American eagle in full attack against the wrongdoers who would destroy our system of law and order."

"And you want it stolen?"

Hamish Blake leaned back in his chair. They were seated in the front window of the High Court Restaurant, finishing a lunch more elaborate and fattening than Nick was accustomed to eat. "Please don't use that word," he advised Nick. "I am, after all, an attorney in good standing in this community."

"What's so valuable about that eagle? My fee is twenty thousand dollars, you know."

"I know, Until recently the stone eagle stood on top of a pedestal on the grounds of my uncle's country estate. He was Judge Norbert Blake. You must have heard the name."

Nick shrugged. "My home is a thousand miles from here. I don't follow your local papers with any regularity."

"Nevertheless, he was an outstanding jurist well known throughout our state. When he died last year at the age of sixty-seven,

still active on the bench, it was a blow to all right-thinking people."

"How did the eagle end up here, in the center of downtown?"

"My uncle willed it to the city, to be placed in this public square in front of the county courthouse. I want it back, Mr. Velvet, and I'm prepared to pay your fee."

"A three-thousand-pound eagle." Nick thought about it. "You see, I don't steal art objects or anything of value. Certainly that statue must be worth money."

"For estate purposes it was appraised at $3000 — a dollar a pound, you might say. But I was told quite frankly that no dealer would pay even one-tenth of that amount for it. I'll be frank, Mr. Velvet — you said it wasn't pretty and I agree. In fact, it's downright ugly, and poor art besides. The city accepted it only to honor my uncle's memory. A decade or two from now I'm certain that some excuse will be found to dispose of it."

"But you don't want to wait that long."

"No."

"All right," Nick said. "It's bending my rule a bit about not stealing anything of value, but I'll do it on one condition. I want your word that there is nothing of value hidden inside the statue — no jewels or money or incriminating papers or anything else."

"There certainly isn't, Mr. Velvet. If there were, it would be so much easier to remove them from the eagle where it stands. Someone with a short stepladder could come by in the middle of the night and get them with ease."

"Very well. Where do you want the statue delivered?"

"Back where it was — on the pedestal in my late uncle's garden."

"Hardly the place to hide it from the authorities."

"Let me worry about that," Hamish Blake said. "How soon can you do it? I'd like it delivered, if possible, by Monday."

Nick gazed across the street at the truly ugly stone bird. "Three or four days. I'll need to locate the right equipment."

"Fine. Here's something in advance. You'll have the rest when the eagle is back on its original perch."

Nick downed the remainder of his luncheon coffee and stood up to shake hands. "You'll hear from me," he said.

Toward evening, when the work of the county courthouse had ended for the day and the last of the lawyers and judges and secretaries had departed, Nick Velvet walked alone in the grassy square before the old building. The bright June sun was still an hour from the western horizon, but already downtown was deserted.

Nick strolled once around the great stone eagle, assuring himself that it was not attached permanently to the granite pedestal.

Apparently the city fathers were satisfied that the weight alone was enough protection against theft.

As he was leaving the scene, thinking about taking in a movie before returning to his hotel, a girl with long reddish-blonde hair emerged from a parked car and approached him. “I saw you admiring the eagle. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

For an instant he was taken aback. “I — yes, it’s quite nice.”

“Did you notice the plaque? It was donated to the city by my grandfather. Judge Norbert Blake.”

There’s always a beautiful granddaughter in these things, Nick thought. Aloud he said, “I’m a stranger in town, but he seems to have been an important man.”

“He was. He could have been a justice of the State Supreme Court if he’d wanted.”

Her face and eyes were intensely honest, filled with an openness Nick found refreshing. He guessed her age at about 23 or 24, and noticed she wore no wedding or engagement rings. Her blouse and slacks looked casually expensive to his masculine eye. “That’s quite an eagle,” Nick commented.

“It’s more than just an eagle. It’s a symbol of everything my grandfather stood for — of law and justice and our great nation. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to that eagle.”

Nick’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Suppose you and I have a drink across the street at the High Court. You’re old enough to drink, aren’t you?”

“I’ll be twenty-five next week.”

“That’s sure old enough. Come on.”

She ordered a gin and tonic and settled into the booth opposite him as if they were old friends. “I feel as if I picked you up,” she said, but it didn’t seem to bother her.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Nick agreed. “And I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Silke Blake.”

“Silk?”

“With an e on the end. Goes good with Velvet, doesn’t it?”

“So you know me.”

“Yes. My uncle hired you, didn’t he?”

“I can’t comment on that.”

“I understand you steal things — unusual things. Did he hire you to steal that eagle?”

“I told you I couldn’t comment.” He sipped his drink. “But suppose it were true. Why do you think he’d want a thing like that stolen?”

“I can’t imagine, unless it’s to discredit my grandfather in some

way."

"From what you've told me, that would be hard to do."

"It certainly would. He was a fine man."

"Tell me a little about him as a person. I guess I know enough of his legal career."

"Well, I suppose that big house and the eagle tell you something about him. When I was young — younger — we used to call it the House of Usher, after Poe's story. Grandfather was a great admirer of everything Poe wrote."

Nick gazed across the street at the stone eagle, almost expecting it to take flight with a cry of "Nevermore." He listened while Silke Blake recounted the usual childhood memories of idyllic summers and midnight swimming and moonlight treasure hunts. It might have been a feminine version of Huck Finn, and he could only conclude that was the way things were in the rural midwest.

"It sounds like a wonderful childhood," he conceded, remembering his own grim youth on the pavements of lower Manhattan. "But it doesn't really tell me much about your grandfather."

She tossed her long silken hair, and he wondered if her name or the hair had come first. "All you need to know is that I loved him very much — and I won't let anyone harm the memory of his name." She finished her drink and stood up to leave..

"Don't you have time for another?" he asked.

"One is sociable, two is friendly, and three is intimate, Mr. Velvet. We haven't reached the friendly stage yet."

"I'll try again," he promised.

Nick spent much of Saturday arranging for the helicopter with which he hoped to lift Judge Blake's legal eagle from its base and transport it back to its proper perch. A phone call to Hamish yielded the information that there was a helicopter rental firm at a private airport outside of town, a company with which the judge himself had been friendly during his lifetime.

But once he'd rented the copter, Nick faced a new problem. He could fly the thing himself if necessary, but it would be tricky at night. And someone was needed on the ground to secure the cable around the statue.

It was not the first time Nick had been forced to hire an assistant. Once, while stealing the water from a swimming pool, he'd hired the entire Fire Department at $100 for each man on the pretense of filming a television movie. But as a general rule he liked to use as few hired hands as possible, being careful to keep them in the dark as to his true purpose.

He found the man he needed at the airport where he rented the copter. Jimmy Claus was his name, and money was his only game. “You want me to fly it?” he asked. “And for that you’ll pay five hundred bucks?”

Nick nodded, studying the slim long-haired man in his soiled T-shirt and jeans. “That’s it. But it won’t be easy. We have to move a statue from the city to a new suburban location, and because of traffic problems the move must be accomplished at night.”

“Which night?”

“I was thinking of tomorrow.”

“Sunday?”

Nick shrugged. “Fewer people around downtown. Less chance of accidents.”

“Where’ll you be?”

“On the ground guiding you and attaching the cable to the statue.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to use a truck?” Claus asked, growing a little suspicious.

“Too much danger of damaging the statue. With a helicopter we can lift it straight off with not even a scratch.”

The long-haired man squinted into the sun and thought about the $500. “Okay, no problem. Let’s take her up for a spin first, though, so I can look over the area by daylight. I don’t want to go crashing into any of them buildings.”

On Sunday morning Claus and Nick took the copter up and flew north to their goal. The city’s downtown was nearly deserted, and for a wild moment Nick considered the possibility of hooking the cable around the statue and flying off with it now. But he hadn’t scouted the Blake country estate yet, and to be seen flying haphazardly around town with a ton-and-a-half eagle hanging from a cable would surely bring police to investigate.

So they flew out to the suburbs empty-handed, dipping to tree-top height until Nick spotted the estate of the late Norbert Blake. When he’d verified the address and the description given him by Hamish, he tapped Jimmy Claus on the shoulder and said, “Set her down there, on that lawn.”

“This is the place?”

“Yeah.” When they had landed, Nick added, “Stay here. I have to see the man.”

Hamish Blake had appeared in the doorway to the terrace, holding a tall drink in one hand. He strolled down across the neatly trimmed lawn to intercept Nick. “What’s the meaning of this — landing that thing on the lawn!”

“Tonight, after midnight, we’ll be coming back. With a delivery.”

Hamish Blake grunted. “And the entire countryside will know how it was done.”

“You’re going to have it sitting in your back yard anyway, so it won’t be any big secret.” Nick gestured toward the house, where he could see an empty pedestal standing in the rose garden. “That where it goes?”

“Yes. Facing out, away from the house.”

“How will we find it in the dark?”

“There’s a spotlight up there under the roof. It lights up this whole area. I can turn it on whatever time you say.”

“Midnight tonight.”

Blake nodded. “Fine.”

“Will anyone else be here?”

“Just myself. I don’t want my wife involved in this. As soon as you return the eagle to its perch, the money is yours.”

“The police will find it.”

“I only need it for a day. Then they can have it back if they want it. But I’m relying on you to cover your tracks well enough so they don’t follow you out here immediately. You know about the television monitor?”

“The what?”

“The city is testing a half dozen television cameras in various downtown locations as a crime deterrent. One of them is on a light pole across the street from the courthouse and it monitors that whole area.”

“I must be getting old,” Nick admitted. “I never noticed it.”

“Any problem?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll see you at midnight.”

“Or shortly after. I have to wait till the streets are deserted.”

“I understand.”

They shook hands and Nick walked back to the helicopter.

Sunday night was cool and overcast after an early evening rain. By midnight, after a movie house down the block had disgorged a dozen or so paying customers, the area around the old courthouse was quiet and empty of traffic. Nick observed it from a doorway across the street, paying special attention to the small television monitor he now saw mounted on a light pole some twelve feet off the ground. Occasionally the camera would be moved in an arc by remote control, but mostly it stayed in one position. Whoever was monitoring the sets at police headquarters did so in a most haphazard manner. Nick figured he might have about five minutes before they realized something was amiss.

At ten minutes after twelve Nick switched on the little portable radio transmitter he carried. “Calling copter one. Do you hear me, copter one?”

There was a crackling in the speaker and then Jimmy Claus’s voice came through. “I’m here. Okay to come lower?”

“Come ahead.”

The sound of the helicopter grew closer. Nick switched off the transmitter and picked up a long wooden pole that rested against the wall next to him. He walked quickly across the grass of the square to a point just behind the light post supporting the television camera, then paused to remove a small can of spray paint from one pocket of his jacket. Holding the can away from him, he pushed down the aerosol button until the paint began to spray. Careful not to spray himself, he then taped the can to the end of the pole and lifted it high above his head. In an instant he’d spray-painted the lens of the television camera.

The helicopter was coming in low now, its sound reverberating among the buildings. Nick tossed away the paint can and pole and ran toward the stone eagle. With luck the man monitoring the set would fool with the dials for a while before he sent a patrol car to investigate.

He saw the cable snake out of the bottom hatch of the copter and waited to grab it. Then, following moves he’d rehearsed in his mind a dozen times, he looped the cable under the eagle’s rampant wings and locked it in place. He radioed Claus to start lifting.

Nick held his breath as the stone eagle wobbled on its perch, about to take flight. The ugly beak tilted in his direction, then swayed and lifted clear of the pedestal. In the distance he heard the first faint whine of a siren.

Jimmy Claus knew how to fly the copter with skill and daring. He went straight up, clear of the buildings and the city lights, then headed slowly away with his burden. Nick raced back to his rented car and drove off in the opposite direction. The siren was getting closer, but he was out of sight before the police car appeared.

Now if Claus could only set the statue down on its perch at the Blake estate as easily as he’d made off with it, the $20,000 fee was as good as in Nick’s pocket.

The spotlight on the rear of the Blake country home bathed the rose gardens in a sharply etched glow, showing the empty pedestal clearly. Nick parked his car in the driveway and searched the night sky for some sign of the helicopter’s running lights. “Calling copter one — do you hear me, copter one?”

“I’m up here,” came the reply. “Waiting for your signal. Okay to

come in for delivery?"

"Come on down," Nick said.

Then he heard the familiar beat of the rotor blades as Claus brought the helicopter in low, traveling slowly to minimize the sway of the cable-held eagle. Nick watched the statue's descent for a moment, then glanced around to see that Hamish Blake had appeared on the lawn behind him. "How's it going?" Blaked asked, then suddenly there was the crack of a rifle shot and the simultaneous shattering of the spotlight. The lawn and rose garden were plunged into darkness.

"Damn!" Nick didn't bother to seek the source of the shot. He was on the radio to Jimmy Claus. "Copter one — trouble down here. Take her up!"

"I can't see a thing." Jimmy crackled back.

"Hang on."

At Nick's side Hamish Blake was bellowing into the darkness. "Who's there? Damn it, who are you?"

The voice that replied was female, and Nick recognized Silke Blake at once. "It's just me, Uncle Hamish. Looking after Grandfather's good name, which is more than anyone else in the family ever did."

"Why did you shoot out the light?"

She came forward, dressed in tight jeans and a black turtleneck sweater and carrying a .22 rifle at her side. "So you couldn't bring that statue down here. I knew you were up to something, hiring Nick Velvet like that!"

Nick grabbed the rifle from her and she offered no resistance. "Well, the copter can't stay up there forever and he's sure not taking the eagle back to the courthouse. It's either bring it down here or dump it in the river. Which do you want?"

"You can't land without lights," Silke answered smugly.

"If it goes in the river, you're out twenty grand, Velvet," Hamish Blake growled. "I want that statue right down here!"

Nick clicked on the walkie-talkie unit. "Copter one, do you hear me?"

"Right here," came the reply.

"Do you have any emergency flares aboard?"

"I think there are a couple in the supply pack."

"Drop them and then come in as we planned."

The copter circled one more time and the two flares burst over the night sky. In their eerie light Jimmy Claus descended again and maneuvered the great stone eagle toward its perch.

"You don't know what you're doing," Silke warned, but she made no further move to stop them.

Nick fetched a ladder from the tool shed and climbed up to guide

the bird onto its pedestal. “This how you want it?” he called down to Hamish Blake, working fast before the twin flares burned themselves out.

“A little more toward the front. It must be lined up exactly—That’s it! Yes!”

The eagle settled down slowly until the position was just right. Then Nick unhooked the cable and instructed Claus to haul the cable in. “All finished,” he told Blake.

“Now what are you going to do?” Silke demanded of her uncle.

The flares were dying and the man’s rough-hewn features were sinking into shadow. “Do? Why I’m going to pay Mr. Velvet his money.”

The helicopter circled one more time and came in for a landing on the far lawn.

Nick counted through the wad of hundred-dollar bills, then stowed it away in his inner pocket. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you,” he said, shaking Blake’s hand.

“And you, sir.”

“The hour’s late. I think I’ll be riding back with Jimmy in the helicopter.”

Until then Jimmy Claus had stood at the fringe of the group, barely acknowledging Blake and Silke. But now, as Nick turned to leave, his right hand came out of his jacket holding a Berretta 9mm Luger. “I’m not quite ready to leave yet,” he said. “Kick that rifle over this way, Velvet.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Hamish Blake stormed. “Who is this man?”

“Nobody you know,” Claus told him. “Just a poor guy who spent six years in jail because of Judge Norbert Blake!” He spat out the name. “This is what you call restitution time!”

Nick remembered where he’d found Claus. “You gave me the name of the airport,” he told Blake.

“My uncle had friends there.” He faced Jimmy Claus, unmindful of the gun. “If you work there, it’s because Judge Blake got you the job after prison. You’ve had all the restitution you’ve got coming!”

“Not all. I went to prison while Judge Blake went to this big country estate. Don’t you think we all knew what sort of a judge he was? The ones with money to slip him got off. The poor ones, like me, got six years.”

“That’s not true!” Silke Blake shouted. “My grandfather wasn’t like that!”

“Maybe he wasn’t to you, but he sure was to me! I came up for sentencing for stealing an airplane. It was a second offense, so he

slapped me with ten years. I was lucky to get out in six. The same morning a stock broker who'd swindled people out of more than a million bucks was sentenced. Your good Judge Blake gave him three years suspended."

"Are you accusing him of taking bribes?" Nick asked quietly.

"Damn right I am! Big bribes, too! Everyone in stir knew about Judge Blake."

Silke tried to lunge at him then and Nick had to restrain her. He had no doubt that Claus would use the Berretta if necessary. The whole assignment was turning into a nightmare, and he had only himself to blame for having hired Claus in the first place.

When Silke had calmed down, Hamish Blake asked, "So what do you want?"

"In prison we heard the judge was putting away a nice nest egg for himself. I often thought about latching onto some of it for myself, especially after he died, but until yesterday I never saw a way to do it."

"There's no way to do it now," Nick assured him.

"I think there is. I didn't fly that copter for the sport of it, you know. Statues don't get moved in the middle of the night. You were stealing that stone eagle, and I think the reason is because it's full of the old judge's loot."

"There's nothing in the eagle," Hamish Blake said with a sigh.

"Then you won't mind me breaking it open to see."

"No! You can't touch it!"

Jimmy Claus twisted his lips in a sneer. "You all just stay right where you are." He picked up the rifle and backed through the terrace door, heading down to the statue.

"Stop him!" Hamish Blake pleaded with Nick. "My God, stop him! He's going to smash the statue!"

"So you lied to me — there is money in it!" Nick said.

"There's no money, nothing. But if he smashes it—"

Nick went down the lawn after him. "Claus, wait a minute!"

"What is it? Stay back!"

"I've got almost twenty thousand in cash here in my pocket. Take it and leave these people alone."

"I don't steal from you, Velvet. You're one like me. We stick together. I just want the judge's money."

He raised the rifle high over his head, about to bring it down on the stone beak of the eagle, but Hamish Blake stopped him with a shout. "Smash that and none of us will find the money!"

Jimmy Claus hesitated. "What do you mean?"

All at once it was clear to Nick. "He means it's a treasure hunt, just like Silke used to have as a child. I should have guessed it when I

learned Judge Blake was an admirer of Poe. It's like *The Gold-Bug,* isn't it?"

"Yes," Hamish admitted. "Something like that."

"The stone eagle is necessary to find the treasure, and you didn't realize it till after it had been given to the city. That's why it was worth twenty thousand for you to have it back here in the rose garden, even just for a day."

Claus put down the rifle and pulled the Luger from his belt. "All right, show me how the statue tells where the money is!"

"There's no money!" Silke insisted, almost frantic now. "My grandfather did not take bribes!"

Hamish Blake ignored her latest outburst and drew a folded piece of paper from his inner pocket. It was too dark on the lawn to read it, so they moved back to the lighted terrace. There, looking over Blake's shoulder, Nick read the neatly typed message:

For those who seek my treasure, let them dig where the shadow of the eagle's beak falls. Dated this 24th day of June at two o'clock and signed by Judge Norbert Blake. There was a squiggle of a signature.

"Your uncle signed it?" Nick asked.

"Yes. That's his signature. I found this in a box of his papers some months back. By that time the stone eagle was already gone."

"It had to be that eagle? There's no other eagle around?"

"That's the only one. He must have assumed someone would read this before the statue was presented to the city."

Even Silke was interested in the message. "But surely you could take a good guess as to where the shadow would fall," she said.

Nick gazed out at the moonlit lawn. "I think you've taken many guesses, Hamish, but they haven't been good ones, have they? All those rose gardens are places where you've dug. The roses were planted later to disguise all the recent digging."

"That's right," Hamish admitted. "Last week I decided I really needed the statue back."

"To see where the shadow would fall at two o'clock on the twenty-fourth of June," Nick said, completing the thought for him.

Silke gave a low gasp. "That's tomorrow!"

"Today," Nick corrected. "It's after midnight."

Jimmy Claus motioned with the gun. "Everybody into the house. It looks as if we're going to have a long wait."

And so they waited. Hamish Blake was nervous at first, trying to talk it all away with words of bland explanation. "Of course I don't believe any of the stories about Norbert taking bribes. I don't expect to find a chest full of money or anything like that."

"Then why did you pay Velvet the twenty grand to steal the

statue?" Claus demanded, still keeping the gun at hand as he lounged by the kitchen table.

"Stop it, both of you!" Silke said. "I don't want any more talk of this. It seems that we're waiting, and so wait we will — if only to prove that my grandfather was an honest man."

And wait they did. Shortly after dawn, Silke prepared breakfast, and by nine o'clock Jimmy Claus and Hamish Blake were talking about a split of whatever they found. Nick walked out to the terrace, rubbing the sleep from his tired eyes, and stared down at the great stone bird. The day was partly overcast, but there was enough sun to follow the eagle's shadow across the rose garden.

At ten the phone rang. It was the Chief of Police, informing Hamish of the theft of his uncle's statue. Did he know anything about it? Did he have any clue as to who might do such a thing? Hamish replied, no, certainly not.

"They'll check on the helicopter," Hamish said when he'd hung up. "They'll see it out on the lawn, and then they'll see the statue there, too."

"We'll move the copter," Claus decided. "Come on, Velvet, give me a hand."

The helicopter was wheeled under some fruit trees and hidden by branches from the road. Then they went back to wait some more, and by now Claus had tucked the pistol back into his belt. They were all anxious to see what two o'clock would bring.

Shortly after one a reporter phoned to ask Hamish about the missing statue. They were playing up the robbery in the afternoon papers. Could he come out for an interview? No, Hamish told him, that would be impossible.

"It's nearly two," Silke said.

"We'd better find it," Hamish grumbled. "Between the reporters and the police we don't have much time before they discover it's out here."

Jimmy Claus nodded. "Let's get some shovels and start digging."

They dug in the rose garden.

And found nothing.

"Daylight Saving Time," Hamish suggested. "Try over to the left."

Still nothing.

"Deeper," Claus ordered. "We didn't go deep enough."

"We're still in the rose garden," Nick pointed out. "In the area where Hamish has already searched."

Claus cursed. "He probably found it himself already."

"But then he wouldn't have needed the statue."

"There's nothing to find!" Silke insisted again.

Claus climbed into the deepest hole himself, turning his back to

Nick. “I’m going to find his treasure if I have to dig clear through to China!”

That was when Nick hit him with the shovel.

Toward evening Nick flew the helicopter back to the airport. Jimmy Claus was tied up in back, and Silke sat by his side in the copilot’s seat. “What are you going to do with Claus?” she asked.

Nick glanced back at the bound man. “Release him, probably. I guess we’re all convinced there’s no treasure, and we can’t very well turn him over to the police and have the whole story come out.”

“My uncle was ready to make a deal with him.”

“There’s nothing to deal with. By tomorrow someone will have spotted the eagle anyway, and Hamish will have a lot of explaining to do. They might not be able to arrest him for taking back his uncle’s eagle, but they can certainly ask him some embarrassing questions.”

“You never believed that about the bribes, did you?”

Nick studied her face. “Of course not,” he said.

“Where are you going now?”

“I have one piece of unfinished business. Then maybe we could have a late dinner somewhere.”

“What business?”

“My rented car is back at your uncle’s place.”

“You’re going all the way back there?”

“I don’t want the car found and traced to me. I’ll hire a taxi to take me back.” He settled the copter to a perfect landings “Will you wait for me here at the airport?”

“Sure.”

He kissed her lightly on the cheek, then climbed back to untie Jimmy Claus.

It was dark by the time he returned to the Blake estate, but Hamish was still in the rose garden, refilling holes by the light of an electric lantern. “Find anything?” Nick asked him.

“You know I didn’t. What about Claus?”

“I gave him a good scare. He won’t be back.”

“And Silke?”

“She won’t be back either.”

“Then why did you come back?”

“For the treasure,” Nick said.

“There is no treasure.”

“There’s always a treasure for men like Norbert Blake. We just weren’t looking in the right place.”

“And where’s that?”

“The treasure hunt in *The Gold-Bug* was at night, and even Silke

told me of moonlight treasure hunts when she was a child. Judge Blake dated his note at two o'clock, but he didn't say day or night."

"There are no certain shadows cast at night. Even the moon would be in a different position each June 24th."

"He only specified shadow — not sun or moon. You're forgetting the most obvious source of light in this garden — the spotlight Silke smashed with her rifle shot last night."

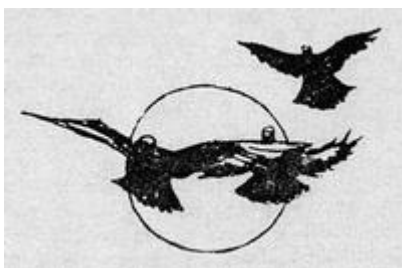
Hamish's mouth dropped open. "I never thought of that."

"Suppose we replace the bulb," Nick suggested. "The light will be at a much lower angle than the sun today, which means the shadow of that eagle's beak will end up far away from the rose garden — probably almost to those trees there."

It took them just ten minutes to dig up the suitcase and to find the packets of hundred-dollar bills wrapped carefully in waterproofed cloth. Hamish was just beginning to count them when the police car pulled up the drive, targeting him with its headlights. They had come to find the statue, and found the treasure instead.

Nick slipped into the woods, leaving Hamish to explain it all the best he could. There'd been no time to grab a packet of the money for himself, but at least he still had his fee. And Silke was waiting for him at the airport.

He guessed he'd wait a while before telling her about the suitcase.



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